

NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY



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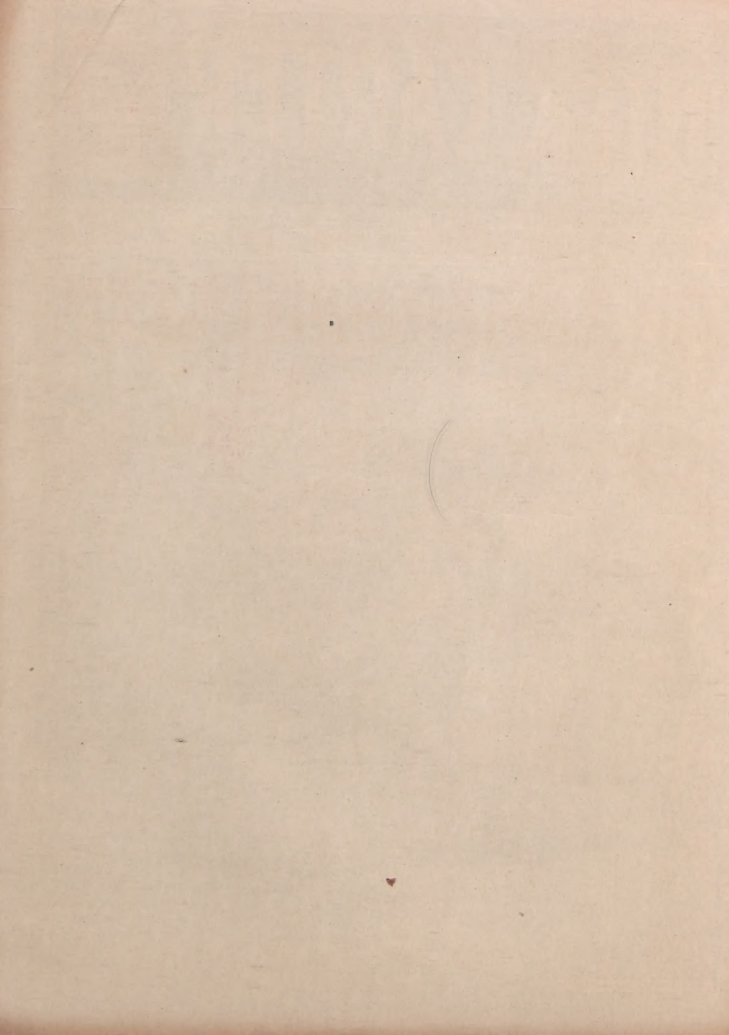
AN AMAZONIAN QUEEN

OR
NICK CARTER BECOMES A GLADIATOR

BY THE AUTHOR OF 'NICK CARTER'



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An Amazonian Queen;

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Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

NICK CARTER FACES A MYSTERY.

A beautiful yacht with perfect lines was resting calmly upon the water of the Bermejo River, which is one of the many mysterious tributaries of the Paraguay, in South America.

For hundreds upon hundreds of miles in every direction from the point where the *Viking* was at rest, there was nothing but forests and mountain-peaks, rising one above another interminably.

To the westward, from that unknown country from which the Bermejo had its source, were frowning piles of mountain-peaks, higher and more forbidding than the others, and it was from among them that the members of the party, now grouped upon the deck of the yacht, had come.

That party consisted of Nick Carter and his assistant, Ten-Ichi; Lief Larsen, captain and owner of the *Viking*; Hilda, a Norwegian princess, who all her young life had been a prisoner of a strange people among those mountain fastnesses, and one Jack Nielsen, who had been

rescued also from that strange people by the efforts of Nick Carter and his two associates.*

They had ascended the river in a launch which belonged to the *Viking*, and thence, from a point hundreds of miles above Oran, then had penetrated through a cavern in the mountains, to a hidden city where the strange people dwelt; and there the rescue had been accomplished.

Now, they had returned thus far; and although the purpose of their mission was accomplished, Nick Carter was by no means satisfied.

He felt that a mystery still existed among those mountains which he wished to solve.

He had been told by Jack Nielsen, that the strange people had gone upon a periodical pilgrimage to the "mountain of the sun," from which they were shortly due to return; and the detective felt, that now, when the princess had been rescued, and Nielsen saved from the fate he had feared at the hands of his captors, his own

*Read the preceding number of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY (No. 520: "The Index of Seven Stars; or, Nick Carter Finds the Hidden City").

wish was to return again to the valley in the mountains, and to know more of the strange and mysterious people who lived there.

And the group already referred to—the members of that little party—were engaged in arguing this very question.

"I will do anything you say, of course," said Nielsen. "You know; Carter, how anxious I am to get home again. My people in New York all believe that I am dead, and——"

"You forget," said Larsen, "that by this time the cable message that was sent for you by my men, from Corrientes, has been received in New York."

"No; I do not forget. But that is all the more reason why I should follow it with as little delay as possible. I submit myself to the will of the party, of course; but I wish to be quite frank with you in saying that I would very much prefer to go the other way—and I have no doubt that Hilda feels the same."

Hilda smiled; then she placed one hand confidently in Larsen's palm, and replied:

"I go wheresoever my king wills me to go."

Then, while a flush of pride glowed under the sunburn and tan of the giant Norwegian's cheeks and brow, she turned her shining eyes toward the others, one by one, and added:

"You—all of you—do not understand, quite; do you? The history of our family—Lief Larsen's and mine—began almost a thousand years ago. It was written then that one day we were to be born into the world; that I should be a lonely prisoner here, in this land, and that he should come from the far north in search of me and should find me. In that time, almost ten centuries ago, his ancestor and mine was the same, and that ancestor decreed what has now happened. Therefore"—she turned again and faced Larsen—"where thou goest, I will go."

Nielsen smiled rather grimly. Then he said:

"I seem to be in a hopeless minority in this affair, so to make the expedition unanimous, I will cast my vote with the others."

But Nick Carter had been thinking deeply while this conversation was going on, and now he spoke.

"I think, Nielsen," he said, "that it can be arranged so that you may return to God's country without us. For fifty dollars we can hire half a dozen of the natives here, to take you down the river in a canoe. In that way you could reach Corrientes in about a week if all goes well with you. I find that I would like to send out some letters, and so if you care to do that, suppose you go ahead and leave us here."

And thus it was settled. It was agreed that in the morning the launch should start up the river for a native settlement where it was supposed a canoe and crew could

be hired for the trip, and that in the meantime Nick should prepare the letters he wished to send out.

But Fate decreed otherwise, as we shall soon know.

The *Viking* was not at anchor in the main river, but had withdrawn into a tributary where the current was sluggish, and here, sheltered behind the spur of a mountain, it rode at ease upon the water.

The night which followed the conversation just recorded was a particularly bright one, for the moon was at the full, and it shone with unusual splendor upon the polished decks of the *Viking*.

The result had been that they all remained until late upon the deck, and that when they did retire to rest, it was to sleep with unusual soundness.

And then, when the full moon had dropped behind the intervening mountains so that the beautiful vessel rested in the shadow, when the night was still and dark, three canoes stole silently out from among overhanging foliage at the shore and were swept by the current, as noiselessly as ghosts, toward the motionless yacht.

The watch in the fore-peak nodded in his drowsiness. The watch at the stern was sleeping, with his arms crossed upon the taffrail and his head resting upon them. Neither of them heard a sound.

And why should they have heard since the stealthy forms that approached made no sound which would have aroused a sleeping dog?

As the canoes touched the sides of the yacht, the people in them rose silently in their several places, steadied themselves, and then one by one drew themselves over the rail upon the deck, leaving only one of their number in each canoe, to hold her fast to the sides of the yacht while they were away.

The watch at the fore-peak and he at the stern were not awakened.

Something was held beneath the nostrils of each man which glowed strangely in the darkness; something that burned and smoked like incense, and which produced a slumber so profound that the strangers who had come upon them out of the darkness did not hesitate to seize them roughly and drop them as if they were dead men upon the deck.

Then others of that visiting company stole into the fore-castle and burned more incense; still others visited the cabin—and half an hour later the three canoes departed, as silently as they had come.

With them were borne five prisoners. Nick Carter and Hilda, the princess, were in one of the boats; Larsen and Ten-Ichi were in another, and Nielsen was in the third one; and not one of these knew as yet that an attack had been made; each was sleeping as soundly, or more soundly, than ever, and each slept on through the night while the canoes in which they were prisoners were propelled swiftly up the stream.

When Nick Carter opened his eyes, he stretched him-

wish was to be rich in jewels of silver here and there; and now, add to that her complexion.

As you have ever seen a highly-polished plate of copper, so placed that not too much light fell upon it, so placed that it glowed with a fire and a radiance that seemed to come from within, you can get a correct idea of the color of this strange woman's skin.

And she was beautiful, too—strangely, wondrously beautiful! In feature and in figure she might have posed for the Venus de Milo.

Her eyes were large and black and luminous; and now, as she looked upon the detective as he sprang from the window to the floor, she was smiling; and when she spoke her voice was as soft and musical and pleasant as if she were a trained society woman of New York—and a woman can possess no greater attraction than her voice when she studies well how to make use of it.

And Nick Carter's astonishment was intensified when he heard her speak, for although she did not address him in the English language, it was no less surprising to hear her use the Norwegian tongue.

It is true that it was the ancient Norse that she made use of—about as much like the Norwegian we hear as ancient Greek is like modern Greek; but Nick, who understood and talked the Norwegian language perfectly, had already become conversant with the Norse through studying it with Larsen, and therefore answered her readily.

The position in which the detective found himself was a strange one indeed.

Here was a woman, strangely beautiful, like no other woman he had ever seen, in any of the points which obtain in racial discrimination, costumed differently from any known usages, ancient or modern, although it was something of an admixture of the Roman and Greek, talking to him as calmly as if they had been engaged in daily intercourse all their lives; and her first remark came to him somewhat in the nature of a revelation. It was a question.

"Are you rested after your long sleep?" she asked, with that matchless smile which exhibited her white, strong teeth, which rendered her mouth strikingly beautiful in its lines, and which developed dimples in her cheeks that were bewitching.

"I am quite rested," he replied, returning the smile; "and also ravenously hungry."

"You shall break your fast presently," she said. "Tell me by what name you are called."

"Nicholas," replied the detective.

She was silent after that for so long a time that Nick became impatient, for she kept her great, luminous eyes fixed upon him in a way that was rather embarrassing.

"Will you tell me where my friends are?" he asked her at last.

She did not reply at once and he had to repeat the question.

"Your friends?" she said then. "The people whom we brought here with you? Are they your friends?"

"Certainly," replied the detective.

"Two of them at least cannot be your friends, for they were here before you came to force your way into this house—or rather to the roof of it—and to take them away. As for the other two, I will admit that they may be your friends, although one of them at least was expected here—has long been expected here, and you cannot have been friends with him for a very long time."

"Nevertheless, where are they?" asked Nick.

"They are in the care of my people and they will be well cared for until it is determined what disposition to make of them," she replied vaguely.

"And what disposition is likely to be made of them—and of me?" asked Nick.

"Of them? It has not yet been determined. Of you? It is only fitting that you should be put to death—although neither has that question been determined as yet."

She made the statement as calmly as if she were referring to the merest every-day incident; and although Nick saw that she was in earnest in what she said, he could not refrain from smiling.

"Why?" he asked.

Without replying to his question, she turned her remarks to another subject.

"Although I have never personally been away from this valley in the mountains," she said, "I am not unfamiliar with that world from which you have come. When I say, 'this valley,' I refer to a chain of valleys one after another, which extend far to the northward from here; and beyond, at the extremity of the most remote of them all, is the Mountain of the Sun, where we go at stated intervals to worship Oz."

Nick inclined his head, and she continued:

"Beyond that place I have never been, although now and then one or more of my people are sent away on errands like that which was the cause of your return here.

"But I know something of that world of yours, beyond the mountains and the seas," she continued; and then she took a step nearer to the detective, and added:

"I would have you, if you would spare your own life, teach me how to conquer that world."

"To conquer the world?" exclaimed the detective, scarce believing that he heard aright.

"Yes," she said. "To conquer that world."

"But you can know but very little of the world indeed if you think that it can be conquered," he told her, smiling.

A flash of anger came into her eyes, and she replied: "You, sir, can know but little of me when you speak so. I conquer where I will."

Nick bowed low and he bit his lip to suppress a smile;

but she saw the act, and the frown on her brow grew deeper.

With one quick step forward she seized him by the wrist and held him so, while she said in a low tone that was intense in its earnestness:

"You thought it a brave deed to come here when the people were gone, to enter this home of ours and to steal away the two whom we left behind us while we were absent on our pilgrimage; but I would have you understand that if you had come at any other time, you nor the men who came with you, would never have penetrated so far. Who and what are you, in your own country?"

"I have already told you who I am," replied Nick. "You have not yet told me who and what you are, madam."

"I? I am the ruler here—for the present. I am Zaidée. My word is the law over my people. This is a country where women rule; where men are servants only."

She had released her hold upon his wrist, and while she spoke now she took several steps backward until she was close to the door through which she had entered the room; and as she ceased speaking, she turned suddenly, and before the detective had the least idea of her intention she had passed through it quickly and closed it behind her, leaving him again alone.

Instantly he leaped forward, but the door had caught fast when it closed, and it was now securely locked against him; and although he called to her, he received no reply, and after a moment he turned back to the couch upon which he had been sleeping, and seated himself upon it.

"I have truly discovered that fabled country of the Amazons," he mused, with a smile. "She would conquer the world, eh? By Jove, she little knows how easy a task that might be for her, in one particular at least, with that strange beauty of hers, with that magnificent presence, that perfect figure and that commanding grace."

He smiled again when he remembered that he was still very hungry; but even as the recollection of his appetite came to him, he heard the sound of approaching feet along the corridor outside his door, and a moment later it was opened again.

And now he started with amazement again at what he saw.

The door was thrown wide ajar to admit two men who carried a table between them, and upon the table was a smoking hot breakfast, which smelled refreshingly appetizing.

But, notwithstanding his hunger, he scarcely saw the table and its contents, nor the two men who bore it into the room, for his whole attention was taken up by the spectacle beyond the opened door.

There, drawn up in double file, with short, h where rifles carried at ease in the hollows of their left to her and dressed in costumes precisely similar in every the spect, save quality of richness and decoration, to those worn by the queen who had preceded them, were ten soldiers—and they were women!

Their costume was minus the cape-cloak that had been pendant from the shoulders of the queen, and the gems and jewels were absent. Also the texture of the clothing was different, for where hers had been fashioned of rich fabrics, these were of doe-skin; and where the queen had worn gold and jewels in her hair, these women were provided with bands and buckles that were made of goat-horn.

Otherwise they looked as if they might all have been her sisters.

There was the same lofty stature; the same pride of bearing; the same regularity of feature and severe beauty of face and figure; the same red-bronze hue of complexion and the same flashing, luminous black eyes.

They were all young, sturdy, handsome; and they stood there beyond the open door as if they were indeed statues of bronze.

"I have visited strange countries and I have heard of strange people," thought the detective, "but surely this is a new experience to me."

There was an eleventh, who stood slightly in advance of the others, and who carried a short, broad, dagger-shaped sword that was shaped like the weapons of the Roman centurians.

An impulse came to the detective that he would try the quality of these feminine warriors, and so, while the two men were arranging the table with the food upon it, he stepped quickly toward the open door and upon the threshold, as if he would have passed outside.

But he got no farther.

Instantly the short sword in the hands of the officer was pressed against him so that the point of it pricked his flesh through his clothing, and the ten rifles were swung around so that their muzzles covered his heart; nor was that all.

There was no word spoken; but when Nick would have held his ground, the woman with the short sword advanced slowly, but surely, and the sharp point of the weapon sank deeper and deeper into his flesh until he was obliged to give way, for he realized that unless he did so the sword in that relentless hand would certainly pass through his body.

And the instant he crossed the threshold again, without a word of command being uttered, the point of the sword was dropped and the rifles were swung back into their original positions. The scene assumed its original aspect.

The faces of the woman soldiers might have been masks of wax for all the expression they showed while

wish we
and taking place; but Nick saw a flash of scorn and
who ^{er} apt in the eyes of the one who held the sword;
he knew then that if he had not given backward
he would have slain him quite as calmly as she had
aced him.

And then the two men who had borne the table between them passed from the room again; the door closed and Nick could hear the tread of departing feet beyond it; and through all this scene not a word had been spoken—not one.

CHAPTER III.

THE LEAP OF THE TIGER.

We hear—and sometimes taste—of varieties of food; but after all is said, food is much the same the world over. Wherever one goes it will be found to consist of meat and vegetables, and the only real difference exists in the methods of preparation.

Nick Carter found that this breakfast that had been brought to him was exceedingly savory, and being very hungry, he ate it all; and after that he found a solitary cigar in one of his pockets, which he proceeded to enjoy to the utmost.

While searching for the cigar he came again upon his revolvers, which had not been taken from him, and he wondered at this, for since he had seen the rifles in the hands of the Amazonian soldiers, he was aware that they were perfectly familiar with the uses of firearms.

Then, while he sat there, pondering and smiling over the predicament he was in, he was suddenly aware that a sense of drowsiness was stealing over him, and he leaped to his feet, startled by the realization that he had been drugged again.

“Thoroughly convinced of this, he sought by every means in his power to overcome the feeling of coma that was stealing over him. He walked up and down the room; he flung out his arms in all sorts of callisthenic exercises; he sought by every means at his command to overcome the drowsiness that was steadily engulfing him.

He ran to the door again, and tried with all his strength to open it; he leaped upon the casing of the window and went out again upon the ledge; and then he returned to the room and threw himself once more upon the couch; and there he speedily lost himself in slumber.

And then—long hours afterward as he supposed—came the second awakening.

This time he found himself in a sort of arena—in the very center of a circular place from which tiers of seats ascended on every side; tiers of empty seats they were, too.

The sun was shining directly down upon him from the zenith, and he knew that the time was about noon.

too—or a Shaker meeting, or a sort of synagogue—with the men on one side and the women on the other—and nobody saying a word."

He looked about him in vain for some sign of his fellow prisoners, but not one of them was there save himself; and then somebody stood up and began to talk in a language he did not understand.

"Even their high priests are women!" muttered the detective. "By Jove! But this is a queer place that I have gotten into this time."

The queen had taken her place in a sort of box that had been reserved for her, and she sat alone at the very front of it, close to the rail over the arena itself, while behind her were groped her waiting women—or her suite, as we may be pleased to call them.

Nick had folded his arms and was standing facing her, so interested in the proceedings that he almost forgot the peril he was in; and now she rose slowly in her place and beckoned for him to approach.

As he drew near to her, in obedience to the summons, he saw that the barrier around the arena was not so high but that by a running leap he might reach it and pull himself over; and he wondered at this, for if he could perform such a feat, surely it would be a comparatively easy matter for the cougar, once released from its cage, to do the same.

But even as he approached the place where the queen was beckoning to him, attendants of the arena began to stretch a strong net around the entire structure at the top of the barrier, and this he saw at once would effectually protect the spectators from the possible attack of the beast.

For the net, though strong, was fine, and the beast would not be able to see it from the ground—that is, he would not see it sufficiently plain to clear it if he should try the leap.

Nick paused in front of her and stood with folded arms, awaiting what she might have to say; and, after a moment of silence, she spoke.

"Yonder," she said, pointing toward the wild beast in the cage, "is a hungry tiger, even as you were hungry this morning. In your right hand, I perceive, you have already taken possession of the only weapon you will have with which to defend yourself.

"In a moment the tiger will be loosed. If you overcome him, another will be released, and still another, each one even more ferocious than the one which precedes him. Do you understand me?"

"Quite well; yes."

"If you succeed in conquering the three tigers—you shall live, Nicholas."

She leaned back and smiled down upon him, and Nick thought even then how strangely beautiful she was, with her copper-colored skin and her shining, black eyes; her perfect figure and her rich and becoming costume.

The den of the tiger was almost directly beneath where the queen was seated; that is, it was a few paces to her right; and now, as Nick stepped backward toward the center of the ring—for he had no wish to be so close when the animal should be released—he saw her make a signal with her hand, which he knew was a command that the cage be opened.

Already he had studied the interior of the arena with its rows of seats above it, and he understood that there was no hope of escape for him from the place.

But even as he stepped backward an idea occurred to him which he resolved to put into execution the moment that the door of the tiger's cage should swing open.

He still held the short sword in his right hand.

He had already tested the blade and the point, and he knew that it was as sharp as a razor at both edges, and that it had a needle-like point.

And then the barred door of the tiger's cage swung slowly ajar.

Nick was watching warily, and now he saw the tiger make one spring outward into the open space of the arena—and come to a full stop, crouching and lashing its sides with its tail.

And then Nick Carter carried into effect that idea that had occurred to him so suddenly, while he was backing away from the presence of the queen.

He knew that the tiger would be puzzled by its sudden liberty; he knew that such beasts think slowly; he knew that five or ten seconds must elapse before the beast would venture upon the attack that was expected of him—and much may happen within five seconds.

The tiger was twenty feet away from him at an acute angle toward the left; the queen sat in her high seat directly in front of him, at about the same distance away, just behind the net which the attendants had stretched for her protection.

The instant when the tiger crouched and began to lash his sides with his tail, Nick Carter leaped forward, not toward the tiger, but directly toward that part of the barrier behind which Zaidee, the queen, was seated.

He covered the distance in three quick leaps and then bounded into the air, for now if ever in his life his athletic training stood him in need.

So well did he calculate the distance, and his own powers, that he alighted on his knees upon the top of the barrier, seizing the netting with his hands and instantly pulling himself to his feet, for he now held the short sword in his teeth, ready for instant use.

As soon as he obtained his balance on the top of the barrier, he seized the sword in his hand again, and with one quick slash he cut the netting as if it were string, from top to bottom; and then, before the amazed queen and her people realized what had happened, he had leaned forward and grasped Zaidee in his arms.

It may be imagined that the queen was by no means a

feather-weight; and yet to Nick Carter's great strength she was scarcely more than that.

So quickly did he act that he had seized her in his arms before she guessed his object in leaping the barrier, for the natural supposition was that he had done so in an effort to escape the tiger.

But the spectators were speedily undeceived as to that.

They saw him seize upon the person of their queen; they saw him lift her in his arms and hold her so that she could not escape—and then they saw him turn and leap back again into the arena, bearing the queen with him; and he ran with her to the very center of the ring before he released her.

And then, as he set her down upon her feet, a shout of warning came from the people on the benches, and he turned just in time to see the cougar creeping toward them on its belly, lashing its sides, and preparing for the spring toward them that was to follow.

But now a sudden and evidently a totally unexpected interruption occurred.

Nick had raised his sword to receive the attack of the tiger, which was slowly creeping nearer when another animal of the same kind leaped into the ring from the same opening, and with two bounds it had crouched beside the first one.

This condition of things, however, lasted but an instant, for the first animal, interrupted in its projected feast, its attention diverted by the presence of a rival, turned with fury upon the newcomer and in another instant the two were rolling over the ground of the arena like two huge cats in mortal combat.

But even that lasted only an instant, for it was interrupted by the roar of a third animal of the same species, which bounded forward from the open cage, and with three leaps came to a stop directly in front of the detective, where he now stood, like a gladiator of old, with one arm around the Amazonian queen, and with the short, sharp, Roman sword grasped in his right hand, ready for instant and deadly use.

And the spectators held their breath in suspense, while all awaited the leap of the tiger upon its victims.

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER BECOMES A GLADIATOR.

Nor had they long to wait.

The great cat was a king of his kind—almost as large as both the others, and proportionately fierce. Its presence there seemed to have awed the other two beasts, for they discontinued their own fight, and slunk backward away from the third one, as if in mortal fear of it.

And then, while a person might have counted three, the great animal leaped into the air, straight toward the spot where Nick Carter was standing with his arm around

the queen and with the other hand holding the Roman sword ready for use.

Nick had already tested the edge of the weapon he held in his hand; he knew it to be as sharp as a razor; and now, instead of stabbing with it when the tiger leaped toward him, he brought it down with terrific force, as if it had been a broadsword, at the same instant giving a start backward and a little to one side, pulling the queen with him.

By that quick motion he succeeded in evading the blow of the great paw; and as the weapon fell, it cleft the animal's leg in twain as if it had been a straw.

So clean was the cut, and so lightninglike in its swiftness that the animal was itself hardly conscious of it until it came down with a thud upon the sanded ground, alighting upon the bleeding stump of the severed leg.

And then it uttered one howl of pain; and for an instant it seemed to look with amazement upon the bare stump where the huge forearm and massive paw had been—and with a whining cry it began to lick at the wound.

It was then that Nick for an instant released his hold upon the woman beside him; it was then that he took a hasty step forward, moving almost as quickly as the great cat itself, and again the razor-edged weapon descended with all that force that was in the detective's arm.

This time the sharp blade fell squarely upon the tiger's neck just behind the ears, and just as the fierce brute attempted to raise its head toward the man who had dared to approach so near to it.

The cut was clean and thorough, thanks to the quality and edge of the blade; and the tiger's head rolled away from the body through the sand of the arena-floor.

But now the remaining two were bristling with rage.

They had witnessed the defeat and death of their monster companion—the only thing on the earth that they feared, and they seemed to understand that the lord of the jungle was down and out for good and all.

Again they crouched; again they lashed their sides with their tails; again they made ready to spring upon their victims, and Nick saw that unless something was done to distract them they would make the leap at the same instant, and that it would then require a miracle indeed to save himself and the woman.

The inspiration seized him to do the very thing—and perhaps the only thing—that could have served him in this extremity.

With a quick motion he seized the cape-cloak already described worn by the woman as a part of her costume. With a jerk he tore it loose from its fastenings, and then, wadding it into a ball, he threw it into the faces of the two beasts that crouched facing him.

It partly unrolled as it fell, and it entirely covered the head of one of the beasts, which snapped at it savagely, and fell at once to tearing at it with teeth and claws.

But all this the detective did not see, for the remaining tiger was already in the air in its leap toward them.

Again Nick struck downward as he had done before, but this time his aim was different. He felt that he must take the chance of receiving a wound in order to render that first stroke of his a death-dealing blow; and he did—both.

This time he struck between the descending paws; struck at the head—and hit it, cleaving it open straight through the center, and bringing the huge body to the dust, a quivering mass of inarticulate flesh and bone.

But the tiger had not entirely missed, either.

In order to reach the animal's head, the detective had been obliged to lean far forward and to reach out with his arm; and the great paw in descending grazed the detective's right shoulder, cutting a deep gash as it fell.

But Nick did not heed this wound then. He had no time to do so.

Already the remaining cat had disengaged himself from the entangling meshes of the cloak, and even as the detective recovered himself from the force of the blow he had already delivered, it leaped toward him.

He saw that it was too late to defend himself as he had done twice before; he saw that the beast must alight almost directly upon him; and he realized that there was but one way to conquer now, and that it must be at great and dangerous risk to himself and the queen as well.

As the tiger made the leap toward them he pushed Zaidée backward with all his strength, so that he sent her reeling to the ground several feet away; and as he did that, he dropped upon both knees, and with his left hand upon the ground supporting the weight of his body, he used his right hand in striking upward with the point of the weapon as the tiger fell upon him from above.

The casualty with which he delivered that particular blow he always ascribed to chance, for he had neither time nor opportunity to direct it more than generally at the huge body of the beast.

But whatever it was that directed it for him, it went true, and the blade, sharp at both edges, and needle-pointed, went straight through the tiger's heart.

Nick Carter was not pretty to look upon when he rolled from beneath the quivering body of the beast and resumed an upright attitude, for the blood of the creature had spouted over him.

But somehow it had missed his face and head, and had only stained his body.

He was scarcely conscious of the vociferous cheers which arose from every side of the arena, nor did he look to see how the women and men had leaped upon the benches and were waving at him ever; thing they had that could be waved; in that they were not unlike other crowds that he had seen, and he paid no attention to them.

Indeed, his whole attention was taken up by Zaidée just then, for she had folded her arms across her bosom,

and having drawn herself to her full height and thrown back her head with a haughty gesture, she stood looking upon him with dilated nostrils and flashing eyes, and with a strange smile which the detective could not define upon her handsome face.

He still held the Roman sword in his hand, for he had withdrawn it from the body of the tiger when he regained his feet; and now, with that gleaming red in the sunlight, he advanced toward her.

"Queen Zaidée," he said, stopping within two paces of her, "do those Amazons of yours—"

"What are Amazons?" she interrupted him, without a change of expression.

"Amazons were, until now, supposed to be a mythical people where women bore the arms and where men were the domestic creatures of the land. Do those people of yours understand the language we talk together?"

"No."

"None of them?"

"A very few."

"Then I will have to ask you to translate for me what I have to say to you."

"Say it."

"I want you to tell them that I had a purpose in seizing upon you and bringing you down into the arena to face the tiger, beside me; tell them that in a few moments I shall lop off the head of their queen—Zaidée's head—even as I did the tiger's, unless the demands I make shall be complied with."

"I had supposed," she replied coldly, "that you would strike off my head first, and make your demands afterward."

"We are not so trained in the country I come from," said Nick drily.

"My life is yours now. Take it if you will," she said to him, and still without a change of expression.

"I would far rather give it back to you," he told her, smiling this time. "All that I ask is that I and my friends who are also prisoners here somewhere be assured of our safety, and of our liberty to depart whensoever we choose."

"You may depart," she replied. "You and two of your former companions; you and the little, dark-skinned fellow, and the man who has been a prisoner here while five summers have come and gone. You and those two may go when you will, Nicholas the Strong."

Nick grinned at the new title; he could not help it, even under the extremity of the situation.

"I am not Nicholas the Strong," he said; "I am Nicholas the Carter."

"The Carter? What is that? I do not know the word."

"It is not necessary that you should know it, Queen Zaidée. I will not consent to the arrangement you would

"I demand the remaining two, Hilda and the Norwegian."

"Demand?" Her red lips curled with scorn as she uttered the one word in interrogation.

"Yes."

She almost laughed aloud then; Nick thought; but she replied coldly enough.

"I refuse," she said.

"Even when your life is at stake?"

"My life? That is nothing. Take it. It is yours."

"I don't want it, thank you," said the detective, shrugging his shoulders. "I suppose you know that this is all mine. This is a great, noble, and all a great, noble, and all a woman under any circumstances."

She looked upon him in grave astonishment.

"A woman may not kill a man, save under great provocation," she said calmly, "but a man may not kill a woman? That is strange, indeed. Men often kill women here—when the woman's back is turned."

"Gee! Somehow you have turned the world upside down in this place."

As he spoke, he realized suddenly that a strange hush had fallen upon the people on the benches, and as he glanced hastily around him he saw that every pair of eyes was fixed upon him, watching his every act.

"Why do your people look at me so strangely?" he demanded of her.

"They are waiting for you to strike," she replied calmly.

"To strike? To strike whom? You?"

"Yes. They have never seen a spectacle like this before now."

"I had supposed that it was quite familiar to them," said Nick.

"Oh! The arena and the tigers? Yes. It is. But the spectacle of a woman overcome by a mere man; the spectacle of their queen standing before a man with her life forfeited to him—the spectacle of any woman, least of all a queen, being subdued by a man, is strange to them. They do not know what to make of it."

"It must be—very funny, Queen Zaidee."

"Why don't you strike?" she asked him.

"I am waiting," he replied.

"Listen," she said. "When you brought me down here into the arena, I hoped that the tiger, or at least one of them, would kill you. Then I should have gained your crown and have fought with them myself. But you are not like other men; you are strong and more fierce; and now I am disgraced forever, unless—"

"Unless what?"

"Unless what?" asked Nick.

"You have the courage to fight with me. Unless you want to do so. Unless you will let me arm myself with a woman like under and fight you. Have you the courage to do that? I want you to let me have the honor and that it is beneath my dignity to fight with a

man. But you are different. My life is forfeit to you now. Have you the courage, the hardihood, to meet me on equal ground? If you have, and you should win, then your demands shall be met. Will you fight with Zaidee?"

CHAPTER V.

THE COMBAT IN THE ARENA.

Nick Carter during his varied career had been confronted by many remarkable conditions and circumstances, but never in all his life had he been brought face to face with a proposition of this kind—and it is not strange that he hesitated.

Neither is it strange, when we stop to consider the environment of the queen, that she misinterpreted his reasons for the hesitation.

She belonged to a nation of women warriors; to a nation where the men were as inferior in feats of arms as women are inferior to men in our own country. She was the ruling queen of that nation, and she was the most redoubtable warrior of them all.

With every weapon known to her people she excelled; and it is not strange, therefore, that when Nick Carter hesitated and faltered over his reply to her remarkable request, she should attribute that hesitation to a doubt on his part of the wisdom of so great an undertaking as an attempt to conquer her, the queen, by a feat of arms.

She did not know that to him she was after all only a woman—and a wondrously beautiful woman at that. She did not understand that to his ears the word "feminine" was equivalent to a claim for protection from and by him.

She knew that her own people were looking down upon her from the benches around the arena with unstinted admiration, knowing as they did what her powers were, with the Roman sword in her strong, right hand, and she believed that he regarded her in the same light.

It could not occur to her that the detective saw before him only a woman and that he would no more strike her with the sharp edge of the sword he held in his hand, or pierce her bronzed flesh with the point of it than he would have butchered a child.

And so she misinterpreted his hesitation, and construed it to be alarm, fear, caution; anything but the real sentiment that was back of it.

She laughed softly; her eyes blazed with contempt and scorn—and she taunted him.

"You do well to hesitate," she said. "You are not the first who have drawn back when brought face to face with Zaidee, the queen. Indeed, it would be a surprise to those whose eyes are upon you if you were to accept my proposition, and dare to stand before me even for a moment with a weapon in your grasp."

He did not reply, but she continued:

"A little while ago, when you seized me and brought me down here by sheer force and against my will, for a moment I respected you. I thought you different from other men; but now——"

"You forget, Zaidee," he said mildly, "the difference in our education. I have been taught to regard women as having a claim on my protection. In my country to attack a woman, or even to oppose one, is considered an act of cowardice. If I should injure you with this weapon that I hold in my hand——"

"And yet but now you threatened me with it; you threatened to lop off my head."

"But surely you did not believe, even for a moment, that I would really do such a thing."

"Why not? Certainly I believed it; and you intended that I should."

"But, Zaidee, you are a woman; you are a beautiful woman; you are——"

"Enough! You are afraid. You are a coward. You refuse to fight with me."

She turned about and raised her hands toward the benches, and was about to say something to the listening and watching people, when the detective's resolution was taken, and he stopped her.

"Wait," he said.

She turned upon him again with flashing eyes.

"Well?" she asked.

"Let it be as you say," he added. "When in Rome, do as Romans do."

"You will fight with me?"

"Yes."

"With the Roman sword?"

"Yes."

"There shall be no shields, Nicholas."

"The conditions shall be as you make them, Zaidee."

Her expression changed again. The scorn fled from her eyes, and again that gleam of admiration that he had seen in them but once appeared.

"You have a right to make the conditions," she said.

"I relinquish that right to you."

"But you are the challenged and also the weaker party in the combat."

"The conditions of the combat shall nevertheless be as you make them."

"Upon my word, Nicholas, you are a strange being. One moment I find you all fire and strength, daring everything, even to that of touching the sacred body of the queen; another moment I find you trembling with fear before me, at the prospect of meeting me in mortal combat with a weapon in my hand; and then comes still another moment when your courage returns to you, and with a word you—bah! Is this another one of those conditions which you referred to but a little while ago as 'bull?'"

"No. Make your conditions. I will meet them—and you."

She turned again toward the people on the benches and she called out to them in that unknown tongue of which Nick here and there caught only a suggestion of its meaning; but as she talked he saw varying expressions cross the faces of those who listened, and he knew that something had caused them great astonishment; and when the queen had finished, there was a burst of applause such as had not been given before, even when he slew the tigers.

A moment later one of the young woman-soldiers leaped into the arena and brought with her a sword like that which Nick held in his hand; and presenting it by the handle to her queen, she withdrew again, and once more climbed upon the benches.

A deathlike stillness was over the place now, as Zaidee, sword in hand, turned and faced the detective; and Nick said to her, very quietly:

"One moment, Zaidee."

"Is this a return of your spasm of cowardice?" she demanded, with one foot advanced toward him.

"No."

"What then?"

"You will have to give me a word or two of instruction regarding this combat which you have seen fit to impose upon me. You must remember that I know nothing of your methods of fighting. You must tell me something of your set rules of attack and defense."

"There are only two rules," she replied. "To kill—and to keep yourself from being killed."

"No more than that?"

"No."

"It is not sufficient, then, to win the fight, that only blood be drawn?"

"A truce to parleying!" she cried out angrily. "Kill—or be killed!" and she leaped forward to the attack so fiercely that she almost struck him down at her feet before he had a chance to defend himself at all.

He gave ground, of course, as he had to do, for her blade was making a circle of light around his head, which was for the moment dazzling.

In that instant the detective realized two things. They were: That the woman would kill him if she could do so, and that she was an undoubted master of the weapon she wielded.

We who are familiar with the career of Nick Carter know that he was proficient even to the point of wondrous dexterity with the use of all arms; we know also that he was particularly skilled in the use of the broadsword.

But here was a weapon in his grasp which, while a broadsword, was yet not one.

It was not so long, and it was not shaped the same. It

was sharp as a razor on both edges, and it was straight and needle-pointed.

The effectiveness of his weapon against the tigers had shown him something of the quality of these blades, and he knew that the slightest touch against the flesh of the woman who faced him so dauntlessly and so savagely would mean a wound which might prove mortal; and what was still more important, he knew that she was fighting fiercely to inflict just such a blow as that upon him.

Of course the reader understands that Nick Carter's effort in the fight was to be devoted entirely to efforts at defending himself from harm and disarming her; for strike her with that terrible weapon he would not; and twice in that first combat, she laid herself open to an attack where, with his superior skill, taught in the best schools of Europe, he might have wounded her seriously.

She seemed to realize this when he failed to take advantage of his opportunity the second time, and she attacked him the fiercer for it.

Nick was amazed at the strength of her arm and wrist; at the *desseiny* with which she wielded her weapon, and with the fierceness of her attack.

He gave ground constantly, traveling in a circle, while she pursued him step by step, and she seemed never to tire, either.

Time after time he might have drawn blood from her bare arms, for she had thrown aside the jacket she had worn. Time after time he might have pricked her neck, her throat, her bosom—might even have jabbed the point of his blade through her heart; and time after time she came near to taking his life with her own weapon.

Her school of fence with the blade she wielded was self-taught. It understood none of the tricks of the art as he knew them. He realized that among her own people she must indeed be a warrior to dread because of the very fierceness of her attack, and because of the agility and strength in her arms, and the keenness of vision in her black eyes.

And so he continued to give ground, traveling in a circle, while she followed him—step by step, with the light of combat in her matchless eyes and the blood-thirst in her demeanor.

Their weapons rang like bells as they clashed together, and the spectators looked upon the scene spell-bound, for never before had they been fortunate enough to witness a spectacle like this one.

Time passed, as Zaidée knew, that the man might never have wounded their queen, and they understood that for some reason he had not done so when he could.

The *valiant* *desseiny* of his mastery of the blade, that his opportunity had not been diminished by his better luck, they knew, and knowing that could have had no explanation in their eyes—and it was an ex-

planation which they understood—which she, the queen, also understood, but of which Nick Carter did not even dream.

He was to learn what it was later on, however. He was to understand that in fighting the battle in the way he did but brought upon him further complications of which he did not know at the moment.

Nick sought from the beginning to disarm the queen, but her wrist was like steel and her hold upon the weapon she held was like a vise.

But she did not possess the endurance that was Nick Carter's.

Any other man, facing her as he did, might have been overcome and stricken down speedily before her furious attack; any other man might have tired even more rapidly than she did; but Nick Carter was steel in his flesh and bones, whalebone in his muscles.

He knew when the furious pace she had set began to tell upon her.

The flush upon her bronzed cheeks grew deeper as she fought; but after a time this began to fade, and gradually it gave place to a suggestion of pallor—to a fading of the color of lips and brow and cheeks which betokened fatigue; and he knew that she was tiring rapidly, and that soon she must succumb to him from sheer exhaustion.

And she knew it as well as he did.

It angered her; maddened her; and suddenly, with a desperate cry, she leaped forward upon him as if she were determined in that last effort to do as she had proclaimed—to kill, or to be killed.

"Die!" she cried out; and the weapon in her hand was poised for the fraction of an instant directly over his head.

CHAPTER VI.

NICK CARTER WINS A QUEEN.

It was for this moment that Nick Carter had been waiting; the moment of an unguarded attack when all of Zaidée's effort should become centered upon the desire to kill, and she should for a second, at least, neglect her caution of grip and wrist action.

It came with this spasmodic attack, when she dashed through his guard, reckless of her own danger, and sought to bring her Roman sword down upon the crown of his skull; and it was with a force that would have cleft his head open to his shoulders had it landed.

But it did not land.

The detective crouched a little as she leaped to the attack; he sprang backward a step, and then he swung his own weapon around with a force that was tenfold greater than any he had used before during that combat.

The edge of his own blade caught hers just in front of the guard, just near to her hand where she grasped

her own weapon, and it cleaved through it as if the blade were made of paper.

The next second she stood weaponless, disarmed, before him.

The blade of her sword had flown through the air toward the benches, and striking upon its point at the top of the barrier exactly in front of the seat from which he had taken her when he carried her so forcibly into the arena, it stuck there, quivering and vibrating, as if it, too, were worn out with the exertion of the fight.

And the handle of that same weapon, wrenched from her grasp by the force of the detective's blow, fell to the ground in front of her, a useless thing, indeed.

For one instant Zaidee looked upon her opponent in utter amazement, as if she could not understand what had happened—as if it were all new to her, as indeed it was, for she had never before in her life been worsted in a combat like this one; and then she calmly folded her arms across her bosom, and with a cold smile upon her lips and in her eyes, she waited.

"Kill!" she almost shouted, when he made no motion toward her.

"Wherefore?" he asked.

"You have won the right to kill; therefore kill!"

"Wherefore?" he asked again.

"You have conquered me."

"All the more reason why I should spare you."

"Would you humiliate me, even to such an extent as that?"

"Is it humiliation in this country of yours to be overcome by one who is more expert in the use of weapons?" he asked.

"It is humiliation for a woman to be overcome by a man."

He laughed—and threw the weapon he still held in his hand at her feet.

"Take it," he said. "If there is killing to be done, do it yourself, Zaidee."

For a moment she stared at him, her eyes dilated with a strange expression that he had not seen in them before—and she seemed to be totally unmindful of the yells of applause that went up from the spectators on the benches.

Slowly that wondering expression died out of her eyes; slowly a smile crept into them; slowly she leaned forward and picked up the weapon, and then, with the same deliberation she grasped it by blade and handle in either hand and brought it down upon her raised knee with a blow that shattered it in twain; and then, with the handle in one hand and the broken blade in the other, she advanced toward him and held them out for him to take.

Not in the least understanding her action he accepted the gift and at once the spectators of that strange scene seemed to have gone suddenly mad.

They leaped upon the benches. They waved their

hands and arms frantically. They shouted and screeched until they were hoarse. They threw their capes and their head-dresses into the arena. They threw their arms around one another in spasms of exaltation. They danced upon the benches. They leaped up and down in ecstasy—and then they grew quiet again, relapsing into their former attitudes precisely as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Then it was that Zaidee made a sign toward the benches, which was followed by the immediate approach over the barrier of several of the maiden-soldiers of her personal guard; and as they came nearer, the queen turned again to him.

"You are the ruler here now," she said. "You have won. You have overcome the queen. The land is yours, the queen is yours, all the people belong to you, and the prophecy has been fulfilled."

Nick did not understand, and he thought it best to remain silent and await events—which he did.

The several members of the guard who had leaped the barriers came nearer. They brought a cloak that was richly embroidered, which they threw over his shoulders; a section of the wall of the barrier swung ajar, as if by magic, and men entered carrying a litter—a chair after the Segian pattern would be a better description of it.

They set it down beside him, and he was half-led, half-forced to enter it.

Zaidee followed him. The curtains were drawn; the bearers lifted the chair from the ground, and the next instant, with the queen beside him, Nick felt himself borne rapidly away amid the acclamations and plaudits of the throng that was left behind.

One thing only he noticed as he entered the covered chair. He had seen a screen at one end of the arena—had noticed it early in the experiences he had met with while there; and as he entered the chair, the screen was drawn aside, and he saw that all the time during the scenes that had been enacted his four friends had been seated there, and had witnessed all that had taken place.

He saw Hilda rise in her place and wave her hand toward him; he saw Lief Larsen gesticulate toward him; he saw Ten-Ichi making signals, and he saw Nielsen also, sitting as quiet and unconcerned as if nothing had happened.

And then he was borne away out of the arena with Zaidee seated beside him, behind closed curtains, and he knew that the exercises for the day were over.

"Well, Zaidee," he said presently. "What next? What more is there to do now?"

"You do not understand?" she asked calmly.

"I understand that the circus is over, if that is what you mean," he replied.

"But you do not understand, do you, the significance of what you did there in the arena?"

"The significance of conquering you?" he asked.

"No. You threw the sword with which you had conquered me at my feet, on the ground."

"Yes."

"I picked it up from the ground. I broke the sword in half. I presented the two parts to you for your acceptance. You received them, one in either hand. Do you not understand now?"

"I understand what you tell me; nothing more."

"By that act——" she hesitated.

"Well?" he asked impatiently.

"By that act," she resumed, "you accepted the responsibility of the care of my people. By that act you became king over me, first, and over the people. By that act——" she hesitated again, for she was very feminine, after all.

"Well?" he asked her again. "By that act——what?"

"By that act you won me for your wife. You made me yours in the sight of all my people; and I—I accepted the condition. The laws of our people are that in fighting me you had to do one of three things—that is, if you conquered."

"I begin to understand you now, Zaidce."

"In winning the battle my life became yours, to do with as you pleased. You became the king. You were expected to slay me then and there. If you chose to grant me my life it was your privilege to turn away and leave me, and I would have sunk at once to a level with the people, and have become one of them. It would have killed me—I would have taken my own life, but you did not know that."

"No."

"When you cast the weapon at my feet it told the spectators—it told me—that you gave me my life. Had you turned away, then, you could have chosen any one of the women of this kingdom to be your queen."

"I am understanding you better and better, Zaidce. Go on."

"But when I broke the sword in half and held out the pieces to you, you received them—one in each hand."

"Yes."

"By that act you restored me to my place in the esteem of all. By that act you did away with all the humiliation I had suffered; by that act you proclaimed to all that you chose me as queen."

"I see."

"And according to the law of our people in one week from this day, at the same hour of the day, the marriage-rites will be performed."

He did not reply, for he was thinking very deeply over this new complication of affairs, and they rode on in silence for a distance.

But suddenly she turned to him, and placed one hand extraneously upon his arm.

"Nicholas!" she said, in a half-whisper.

"Yes?" he replied.

"Teach me how to be a woman—will you?"

"How to be a woman? You are as feminine a woman as I ever knew, Zaidce, save for the qualities of strength and daring that are yours. They do not belong to women in the country from whence I come, but they are none the less admirable, and I think the more of you for possessing them."

"Nevertheless, teach me how to be a woman, as you know women."

"I will try to do so, Zaidce," he said, temporizing. He could not know as yet just what conditions he would have to fulfill in order to save himself and his companions from ending their lives amid these mountains; therefore he temporized.

"After we are married?" she asked.

"Yes," he replied, "after we are married. It seems rather strange to me that a people so remote as yours from what in my world is called civilization, should perform the same customs and ceremonies as obtain among us."

"Our customs and ceremonies are such as were taught my people in an olden time, long ago, when there came among us a king from another land; a king from whom I am descended."

"You? I thought that Hilda——"

"It was the custom then that the king should have two wives; one of them was chosen from the people who originally lived here; the other was brought to this country from a place that is called Norway. I do not know where it is. She was always a white woman; or, if the reigning sovereign happened to be a woman, a white man. Always with strangely-colored hair, like Hilda's—like Larsen's. I am descended from the native branch of the descent; Hilda is from the other."

"I see," said Nick smiling. "Rather a complicated condition of things, don't you think?"

"Hilda is the last of the white-skinned descent," she continued, without replying to his question. "Our legends told us that a man like Larsen would come some day to claim her for wife; but we despaired of his coming. We lost faith in the legends; and so the man Nielsen was found and brought here."

"But I, the reigning queen, was jealous of Hilda. I saw my power slipping from me. The realm had changed from man-governed to woman-governed. When Nielsen was brought here I saw to it that he was kept always under the influence of our copa-plant; and I easily persuaded my people that he was not fit for the alliance, saying that he had no thinking brain."

"And then you came—you and the others. You took Hilda away. The legend had been fulfilled, but only in part. My people swore to me that unless you were overtaken and brought back here—your entire party, I mean—my life should pay the forfeit."

"And now even a greater prophecy has been fulfilled, for you have won me as your wife and queen. The reign

of woman is over. The superlativeness of man begins again with you for king—with me for your queen, your wife."

CHAPTER VII.

THE FASCINATIONS OF CARMA.

The bearers of the litter stopped before the entrance to the palace, and, having set it down, the curtains were drawn aside by an attendant.

"Step out," said Zaidée. "You are the ruler now. You go first."

"In my country," replied the detective, repressing a smile, "ladies always precede the men in little things. After you, Zaidée."

She looked toward him with a smile in her wonderful eyes, and then without more words, she stepped out of the chair and stood there waiting for him.

But here she resolutely stepped back and signed for him to go ahead of her; and so he followed the officer of the guard—which, by the way, was the same handsome young woman who earlier in the day had pricked his flesh with the point of her sword—through the open door of the palace into a large and lofty hall, which seemed to have been fashioned in his design and furnishings, so far as appearances went.

Inside the hall he paused and waited for Zaidée to come to his side, which she did with evident reluctance. Indeed, it occurred to Nick just then that he had conquered this strange woman in more ways than one during that combat in the arena.

"Zaidée," he said, "if it is all the same to you, I should like to put on a few clothes—and, incidentally, to bathe. The perfume I am wearing now is not only rather nice, but what little there is of it is uncomfortably smeared with tiger's blood."

"Here is raiment for you, like your own, already being prepared in the apartments that shall be yours until after the marriage-rites are performed," she replied.

"Again, if it will be the same to you," said Nick, smiling, "I infinitely prefer my own clothing. Have me conducted to the same room that I occupied before, or direct that my own clothes be brought to me where I can bathe before I put them on."

To Nick's surprise, it was the officer of the guard who replied to the request.

"It shall be done, Exalted," she said; and she drew herself up before him and saluted with her sword, precisely as a West Pointer might have done it.

"Ah!" said Nick. "So you speak this language, as well as your queen?" he asked.

"Yes, Exalted," she answered.

"Exalted, who?" he muttered to himself, in English.

"Well, it is as good a name as any other. I only wish I knew how in the world I am going to get out of this

complication of affairs." He turned to Zaidée, and in the language she understood he added:

"When and where shall I see you again, Zaidée?"

"Give whatever orders you desire to Carma," was the reply. "She will obey them. You will be brought to me, or I may be taken to you, when you will it so, Nicholas."

"Very good. And my friends?"

"They are subject to your orders. You are the ruler here now. Never forget that. All are ready to obey you."

She moved away from him, and he turned and followed Carma along the lofty corridor.

Presently they ascended a wide flight of stairs and traversed another corridor, until at last his guide halted before a doorway and stood aside for him to enter.

She followed after him, and, rather to his surprise, she closed the door and fastened it after her; and then, to his amazement, she began to talk rapidly.

"You do not know me," she said, with some excitement in her voice. "I am Carma, sister to Zaidée, though younger. Twenty summers have come and gone since I came into the world. It was the accident of birth which made Zaidée the queen instead of me. Why did you accept the broken sword and choose her from among us, when there are many here who are more beautiful?"

He did not reply, for to tell the truth his amazement was too great for speech. He began to wonder if all the women in that strange land would wish to marry him, now that he had conquered their queen.

And this Carma was wondrously beautiful, too.

Nick thought as he stood looking at her, while her eyes were flashing and her bosom was rising and falling in her excess of emotion, that she was even more beautiful than her august sister.

The costume she wore enhanced every quality of beauty that she possessed, too. The tightly-fitting jacket, which was drawn in at the waist-line; the curious but becoming head-dress over her hair of inky blackness, save where a gleam of gold shot through it as the light from the open windows fell upon it; the short, kilt-skirt, blazing with polished silver and mother-of-pearl; the doe-skin leggings, buttoned tightly around the shapely legs; the perfect figure, not so tall or so robust as her sister's; the perfect poise of her shapely head; the teeth of perfect whiteness; the red, shapely lips; the long lashes of her somber eyes now gleaming with a softened light which the most obtuse of men could have understood; and last and most attractive of all, those eyes themselves, with a suggestion of the almond shape of the far East about them.

Carma was beautiful, surpassingly beautiful, transcendently beautiful.

She took a step nearer to him, but he drew back quickly.

"Bring me my clothes, Carma," he said. "My clothes and a bath; then return to me here."

Without a word, but with a curious gleam of satisfaction in her eyes, she wheeled upon her heels and left him.

Five minutes later she was back again, bearing his clothing, to the last article, in her arms, and she entered without a word, depositing them upon the wide couch at one side of the gorgeous room.

Then she stepped to the door again and opened it.

Four men entered, bearing between them a curiously-arranged vessel, as large as an ordinary bath tub. It was filled to the half with clear water; and they put it in the middle of the floor and silently went away again.

And Nick, with the robe around him that had been thrown over him before he left the arena, stood waiting for Carma to go.

But she remained with folded arms near the door, standing there like a statue of bronze—and as calm as a sphinx save for her flushing eyes and heaving bosom, her parted lips and her flushed cheeks.

"I am waiting," he said, also folding his arms. He was waiting for her to go, but she evidently did not understand it so.

With a spring like a panther she leaped toward him. She tore the robe from his shoulders and cast it from her, and in an instant was had undressed his body with her arms and pressed her lips to his own.

And then, as calmly as she made the attack, she leaped away from him again, and with her right hand across her eyes, she fled to the door, and stood with her back to him, gasping, as if she were amazed herself at what she had done—and frightened, too.

"You are taller than me, Carma," he said, trying to speak with calmness. "Leave me now, please, until I have bathed and dressed."

"I will wait outside," she said. "Call me when you are ready—Nicholas."

And then, as if she had committed another unpardonable sin in addressing him so, she turned and fled from the room, but closing the door softly behind her, nevertheless.

"Lee!" was Nick's muttered comment; and for a full minute he searched where he was standing, in the middle of the floor.

"I wonder what next?" he muttered after a moment; and then, with a drop of his shoulders, he looked about him in search of a mirror.

He found one, too, although it was made of obsidian instead of glass; but first, whether in glass or not, although it was somewhat broken, it gave him his reflection sufficiently well so that he laughed softly to himself at the spectacle he presented.

He was naked, save for the tunic he wore from waist to knee. The upper part of his body was dyed almost as

red as the skin of the people of this strange country by the tiger-blood that had spurted upon him; but nevertheless his massive muscles stood out upon his arms and chest, and his exceedingly white skin showed through the stains upon it like alabaster, when compared to the red, polished-copper hue of the skins of the native people.

It was no wonder that the women of that strange land had looked upon him with admiration, although this fact did not occur to him at all.

He only wondered that he, in his stained aspect, had been viewed with any other sentiment than one of sheer disgust at his plight—and he lost no time in stripping off the deer-skin trunks and plunging into the bath that had been provided.

Ah! That bath! And the luxury of it!

He came out of it twenty minutes later, glowing with the refreshing experience; and he discovered, greatly to his satisfaction, when he reached for his clothing, that clean white undergarments had been provided for him.

Half an hour later he was clothed again; and now there was only one thing lacking to complete his satisfaction—a cigar.

But, alas! When he was brought from the yacht it had not occurred to his captors to provide him with baggage, and he had smoked his last cigar that morning.

He crossed the room to one of the windows and went out upon a balcony with which it was provided.

From there he could see down into the street—if street it could be called, for the buildings of the hidden city were not grouped with any study of regularity at all, and there were no streets, properly speaking.

He did not hear a repeated tapping against his door; he did not see that it opened at last, just a very little at first, until Carma looked inside the room and saw him on the balcony beyond the open window.

He did not see that she motioned silently to others who were outside in the corridor, and that the same four men entered and bore away the evidences of his bath, and that when they were gone she entered the room again, closing the door behind her.

And now she crossed the room, pausing directly behind him, and she stood there for a long time, watching him, hoping, doubtless, that he would turn to her presently.

"Nicholas!" she said at last, breathing the name softly, and yet with a distinctness that reached his ears definitely, so that he turned at once.

"Turn to me, Carma," he said. "I did not know that you had returned. Will you come out on the balcony with me? The view from this window is magnificent."

A flush of pleasure suffused her face. Her lips parted in a smile, and with a cat-like spring she was beside him.

Poor Nick! He did not know what a snare he was weaving about himself by that act of invitation. Strange

peoples have strange customs. Things that are meaningless to us are intensely significant to them at times.

When she leaped to his side so suddenly—and, indeed, she seemed to be entirely cat-like in her grace and celerity of movement—she put out her slender hands and placed one at each side of his face; and then, before he had any idea of her intention, she drew him toward her and imparted a soft and caressing kiss squarely upon his lips.

It was not in human nature to repel an advance like that one, particularly from one so exquisitely beautiful as Carma.

History does not state whether Nick Carter's lips returned that kiss or not, and he has volunteered no testimony regarding it.

It is sufficient, therefore, to state that Carma did not consider herself repulsed in any way, for she drew nearer to him until her yielding form was pressed against him, and until, with scarcely a thought of the consequences of his act, he passed his arm around her waist, and held her there.

And down below them, in the square in front of the palace, many people had gathered, seeing him there upon the balcony; and they were looking up at the scene that was enacted before their eyes.

"My king! My exalted! My Nicholas!" whispered Carma breathlessly; and she waved her hand toward the people below them; and among them at that instant appeared the queen, Zaidée. She, also, was a witness to that scene upon the balcony.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE QUEEN OF HEARTS.

Instantly Carma drew him back into the room, out of sight of the people who were gathered below them.

The instant they were out of view from beyond the balcony, she repeated the caress she had bestowed upon him on the balcony, and she did it as swiftly as before. Indeed, it seemed to be her nature to take everything by storm, and as quickly she leaped away from him toward the door.

She stopped there for an instant, panting, breathless, trembling with suppressed excitement.

"Wait here!" she gasped. "Wait for me. On your life, do not leave this room before I return!"

In a breath she was gone again. The door closed behind her, and Nick was alone once more.

And now he laughed rather uneasily. He made a start to return to the window, to look down again upon the people who were gathered below; but for some reason which he could not define he hesitated, and remained where he was, waiting.

"Wonder what sort of a man I have got into now?" he asked himself, with a flush at the recollection of what

had taken place on the balcony in full view of the people below. "I suppose, since Zaidée saw what happened, that she will think there is little loyalty among the people for my country."

He laughed somewhat uneasily.

"Anyhow," he added, "she understood mighty well that when I accepted the two parts of the broken sword I had no idea of the significance of the act. It is all very easy and simple to hold Zaidée at a proper distance; but Carma— Gee-whizz!" She takes one by storm. A fellow gets himself kissed on the lips before he has the least idea in the world that it is coming. Anyhow, they are sisters, and, as I have no idea in the world of marrying either one of them, or of making love to either of them, what's the odds? I wish I had a cigar! By Jove, I do!"

He was searching his pockets again, and his mind had flown to the problem of peaceful escape from the valley, when the door was softly opened once more, and Carma appeared for the third time.

But it was another Carma.

He scarcely recognized her when she entered, so transformed was her appearance.

If the costume of Zaidée, when Nick first saw her, had been wonderful in its extravagance of blazing jewels and decorations of gold, the one worn by Carma now surpassed it a hundredfold.

It was the same in shape and style and cut as the one she had worn when she left him; but the quality of it was different.

The sober garments of her official position had given place to what must have been the court dress of the country. The waist, shaped like a Spanish jacket, blazed with diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires, and fire-stones until the wine-colored texture beneath it all was scarcely to be seen. The kilt, which ended at her knees, sparkled and gleamed and shot forth gleams of fire from a thousand matchless gems; the buttons of her leggings were made of emeralds; the flowing cape which depended from her shoulders was clasped at her throat by a double bar of splendid rubies; her glorious hair was held in place by band after band of diamonds, among which other stones, green and red and blue, blazed out upon him; the short Roman sword pendant from her slender waist sparkled with gems on hilt and scabbard; but infinitely brighter than all else glowed her matchless eyes as she stood before him, awaiting a word or a token of approval.

He caught his breath as he looked upon her.

"Carma," he said, trying to speak with utter calmness, but signally failing in the attempt, "you are beautiful! Beautiful, indeed!"

She sighed with ecstatic pleasure. She took a step nearer to him and paused again.

"Say it again," she whispered. "Say it once again."

He repeated what he had said, using the same words as before, and meaning them none the less that she had asked for their repetition.

"If only you will always think so!" she murmured, coming still nearer, but yet remaining beyond his reach. "If only you will always think of me as more beautiful than all the world beside. If only that—only that, my Nicholas!"

Her eyes, her beauty, her very presence in the room, seemed to cast a spell over him. He was conscious that she was with each instant creeping nearer and nearer to him, across the short space which divided them; approaching with that slow, undulating, graceful motion that kittens use in play when two draw nearer to each other; and he stood looking at her as if he were charmed out of the power of resistance by the light in her eyes, by the beauty of her whole being, by the charm of her very presence.

Again she reached out her arms; again she wound them around him. And then, as on the previous occasion she sprang away from him, just at the instant when the whole world was fading from the view of each of them; when the walls of the palace, the towering mountains beyond and the pathless ocean beyond them were fading into nothingness, and there seemed to be no world at all anywhere, save in the glow of each other's eyes.

She leaped away and stood panting against the door, holding out both her hands as if to defend herself— not from him, surely, but from something she knew not what.

And so the moments passed while each sought to recover from that short whirlwind of forgetfulness.

It was Nick who spoke first.

"Carma," he said, smiling, "are you a witch?"

"No," she replied, returning the smile, and now apparently recovered from the effects of her emotions. "The witch is here!"—she rested her hand against her heart—"and there!"—she stepped close to him and touched him on the breast with the end of her finger; and then she drew quickly back again to the safe retreat near the door.

Nick laughed merrily.

"You certainly have the power to bewitch me," he said. "Come, Carma; what folly have we committed? How will Zaidee understand the cause she attributed upon the balcony?"

"She will understand it as I understand it; as you understand it," said the witch reply.

"Yes?" said Nick, and waited.

"She will know that she is guessed, that I am first. She will know that I am to be queen as well as she—a queen more than she, for I am to be the favorite. Is it not so?"

"Two queens," exclaimed Nick, in English. "And I the king! Great Scott!"

"I do not understand you when you speak in that tongue," said Carma.

"No, child, I said 'Two queens.' Tell me how that can be? Am I expected, now, to marry both of you, because I had the misfortune to be forced into a combat with your sister?"

She glided toward him again, and this time he was wise enough to retreat.

"You do not want her!" she said, and Carma's eyes glowed with the victory she had won, as she thought and believed, over her sister. "You want only Carma. It shall be so. She shall be told at once."

Like a flash she turned—Nick thought that he had never known anybody to move as quickly as she could—and she was out through the door and gone before he could stay her.

"Great Scott!" he exclaimed again. "For taking things entirely for granted, these people here are certainly winners. I wonder what Carma intends to do now?"

He remembered then what she had said as she was in the act of leaving the room.

"You do not want her!" he repeated to himself, in consternation. "You want only Carma. It shall be so. She shall be told." Good heavens! Carma has gone to tell Zaidee that I have turned her down, hard; jilted her, so to speak; or, rather, to be exact, that I have chosen the sister in her place. Now, what—"

A noise in the street attracted his attention, and he hastened to the balcony again.

There was a throng of people below; or, rather, two throngs, for they seemed to be about evenly divided; and they stood facing each other, with a space between them—a space of open ground in the center of which Zaidee was standing.

He saw that she was addressing the people; he could even hear the words she used, although he understood not one of them, for she spoke in that strange tongue that was utterly unknown to him.

But there was excitement in the air; he understood that. There was anger and chagrin in the tones of her voice; he realized that also.

As she spoke, she turned so that she faced first one way and then the other, so that she addressed all the people within the range of her voice, and her tones rose as she continued to talk, and her rich voice vibrated like a bell through the clear mountain air.

Nick wished with all his heart that he was able to understand what she said; but the desire was fruitless. Save for her apparent earnestness, and her anger without excitement, he had no idea of the subject she was discussing.

And yet it came to him suddenly that he was himself the subject of her remarks, for suddenly he heard her strange pronunciation of his name—Nicholas.

Listening yet more intently, he caught Carma's name, uttered over and over again, sometimes coupled with his, often mentioned by itself.

It was at once plain to him that Zaidee was engaged in inciting the people against her sister—and that *he* was the cause of this internecine strife, as yet in embryo.

It occurred to him that he must do something to prevent that.

He must not have this peaceful people, in their strange land and hidden city, excited to strife and bloodshed because its queen and her sister had each chosen that he should be king. It has been said that there is a woman behind all measures of strife, and here it seemed that the conditions were reversed, and that now it was a mere man who was the cause of trouble.

He smiled at the thought, thinking at the moment that it was in keeping with the remarkable condition of things in that strange country, where women were the soldiers and the fighters, the rulers and the heads of households.

He saw, too, that the people who listened to the words of their queen were rapidly succumbing to her arguments, whatever they were; that the excitement was growing; that already there were loud murmurings among them; that soon there would be action.

Stepping farther out upon the balcony, he was about to raise his own voice and to shout down upon them, when through the wide entrance of the palace Carma appeared.

She advanced to the limit of the wide steps which led up to it, and after standing there for a moment, motionless, she suddenly brought her hands together with a loud clap which caused every one of the people to turn and discover her.

She also spoke in that unknown tongue; but she spoke as rapidly as she moved, and with as much vehemence and sureness.

For a moment the people stood silently listening to her.

It seemed to Nick that they were at first surprised, then awed, and then frightened at her words; but suddenly Zaidee interrupted.

She cried out in a loud voice, a few words of command; and as if her authority were still the powerful factor among her people, they moved forward as with one impulse.

At first it was slowly, but then it became a rush, and Nick saw that they were bent upon an attack upon Carma, who remained where she was standing, as dauntlessly as a rock, and as immovable.

It was evident that she did not fear them; it was also evident to Nick that they would presently tear her limb from limb unless he, or somebody, interfered.

She remained fearfully facing them as they approached a smile upon her beautiful face, scorn in her eyes, and something that was greater than either in her attitude—*power*.

And then Nick sprang to the railing of the balcony.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MENACE OF THE HOUSE OF THE MOON.

"Halt, there!"

Nick Carter called out the two words in a voice which every person in the open space below him could plainly hear, and, although not one of them understood the words themselves, they did comprehend their import—and every one of them stopped in his tracks.

Perhaps it would have been better to have said in *her* tracks, for while there were many men present at that scene, they were for the most part women. The men were taking the part of observers, rather than actors.

They stopped, and they looked up toward the point from whence the voice came to them, and they saw the champion of the arena, posed upon the rail of the balcony, ready to leap down among them.

And while they looked, he made the leap.

It was not a great distance to drop, and the place where he alighted was soft with grass and sod; and the instant he touched the ground Nick leaped up the steps until he stood beside Carma.

There was a proud smile on her lips, a haughty poise of her head, and a confident air in her bearing. The fact that but a moment ago she stood in danger of her life seemed not to have affected her in the least.

"Thank you, Nicholas," she said calmly, as calmly as if the scene before them were an every-day occurrence. But he scarcely heard her; he was facing the mob which now threatened to advance again upon its intended victim.

"Stand back!" he called out to them, waving his hands toward them, and, although as before the words were meaningless, the import of them was plain enough.

In effect, they obeyed him.

They fell back a step or two, and then remained where they were; but there were ominous mutterings from them and venomous glances from their flashing eyes.

Altogether, Nick thought it a very picturesque scene, the attacking party being composed entirely of women; and he almost forgot why he had leaped from the balcony at all, in the utter strangeness of it all. Men upon either side, in groups, talking together, as if they were women; women in front of him, armed, menacing in their attitude—fighters, every one of them.

But in that moment the detective remembered the power he was supposed to have attained over these people; he remembered what Zaidee had said to him at their parting—that all would obey him; and remembering, also, that these people directly in front of him could not understand his words, he resolved to test his power at once upon their former queen.

"Zaidee," he called sternly, "come here!"

For an instant it seemed as if the impulse was upon her to obey. She half-started forward; her lips parted to speak; and then she remembered.

She stopped. She drew herself up to her full height,

and it will be remembered that she was a tall woman—quite six feet. She folded her arms, and she regarded him calmly from where she stood.

Slowly a smile dawned upon her face, but it was a smile of derision—a smile of menace; nevertheless, when she spoke there was more of sadness than of menace in her tones.

"Nicholas," she said slowly, "you have forfeited all that you gained in the arena. For that woman beside you, whose head is barely above your shoulder, you have forgone all the glories that awaited you. Think you that I will divide what is mine with her?"

"This is all nonsense," said Nick, in reply. "Come here."

"I will not go to you, now or ever again. I feared all that has happened when I left you in Carma's care; but it was her right and her duty to take charge of you. She is a siren, a witch, and before her wiles you have fallen. Her smile has proved more powerful over you than my sword."

"Come here, Zaidee. Come here and stand beside me," he called to her again.

Once more she seemed about to obey, but some impulse restrained her, and instead she withdrew a step.

"No," she said; "only on one condition."

"What is that?" asked Nick.

"That you order Carma at once to the House of the Moon."

Nick turned, with a puzzled expression, toward Carma.

"Where is that?" he asked. "Where and what is the House of the Moon?"

"It is the house where prisoners prepare for death," she replied calmly. "It is the place of doom. Is it your wish that I should go there, Nicholas? You have but to say the word, and I will obey."

"Does Zaidee mean that she wishes me to order you put to death?" he asked again.

"Yes; that I be thrown to the dogs—although there are no tigers now. You have killed them all. I would have to wait there until others were procured."

"And then?" said Nick. "What then?"

"I would be given to them to eat. It is our regular form of execution."

"Nicholas, please!" cried she, in a pleading tone. "I think you had better remain where you are."

"Thank you. I knew all the time what your reply would be; and Zaidee? What of her?"

"Why do you ask? I seem to have mixed things up terribly, somehow, Carma."

"Should she not be sent to the House of the Moon, since I am not to go?"

"No," he replied sternly. "Nobody will go there by my order."

She made no reply, and now Zaidee called out to him again.

"Beware, Nicholas," she said; "you are temporizing. You are permitting Carma to bewitch you again with her wiles."

"At least, she shall not be sent to her death," he told her. "Nor you, nor any other person of this community, with my sanction or permission."

"Beware!" repeated Zaidee. "Listen to me, Nicholas."

"I am listening."

"I have found that my people are loyal. I have found that they only consented to the rule of a man in this land of theirs because I would rule with him. They will accept you with me; they will not accept you without me."

"Thank Heaven for that!" chimed Nick, with earnestness. "Look here, Zaidee. I have no more wish to be king over these people, less, perhaps, than they wish to have me. Tell them so. Say to them that you shall continue to be their queen, as long as you live, and that it is my—"

"Enough, Nicholas. You do not understand."

"Then tell me what I am to understand, I beg of you."

"There is now only one way in which you may *not* be the king over these people, and that is by condemning yourself to the House of the Moon; by condemning yourself to death, as Carma but now explained it to you."

"Well, I am not likely to do that, thank you."

"And there is also only one way left to you by which you *may* be king."

"Humph! I have got to die, *not* to be king; and I have got to do one thing and no other to *be* king. Well, what is it?"

"Redeem your plighted word with me."

Nick wished to laugh, and he was angry, too. He felt himself to be placed in a false position, through no direct fault of his own—unless, indeed, the faults of the last hour and a half might be counted against him; and even while he thought of that, he felt the touch of Carma's hand as it stole gently into his own, and he felt the thrill that went with it, that was communicated by her touch.

"She means," whispered Carma, "that *she* would be queen; that you would cast *me* out; and to-night—this very night that is about to fall over the world, I would be drugged and carried away through the darkness to certain death, by her order."

Zaidee had seen Carma's gesture by which she had thrust her hand into Nick's; also, she seemed to understand those whispered words, although she could not have heard them; and at once all her patience seemed to be at an end.

Possibly, she had thought until that moment that the new king had really fallen in love with her, and that her sister had stolen the treasure within the hour and a half that had just passed.

It was evident that she had held herself in and preserved her calmness until this moment only with great

effort, and now, at the sight of Carma's action and attitude, and in the face of Nick's very evident preferment for the smaller and immeasurably more beautiful sister, her temper leaped away from all restraint.

She became transformed on the instant to a living fury. Her eyes blazed with rage; her lips were drawn back over her teeth, and her once beautiful face was changed to that of a fiend.

It has already been said that the Amazonian soldiers carried modern rifles in their equipment, and now Zaidee sprang to the side of one of her soldiers and seized the weapon she carried.

In a second of time it was leveled straight at Nick's head.

But he had seen the act, and understood its meaning well enough to escape its consequences, for the instant that Zaidee seized the weapon, he leaped toward her down the steps.

In that instant he saw that it was not himself whom Zaidee intended to slay, but her more beautiful sister, who stood beside him, and a step to the rear.

It was a grand leap that he made, and it carried him to the ground directly in front of the maddened queen before she could use the weapon, and he succeeded in holding it up and thus spoiling her aim before the trigger was pulled.

Then he wrenched the gun from her hands, and seizing her also, he swung her around and so out from among the people who surrounded her, until they stood some half-way between the steps of the palace and the now thoroughly angered women of the mob.

But if he had thought to quell the mutiny by that act, he was soon to learn his error; for no sooner did he relinquish his hold upon Zaidee than she attacked him with a fury of which he had not supposed her to be capable.

And then a surprising thing happened, even in that moment of surprises.

Carma, who had stood like a statue until that moment, seemed suddenly recalled to life. She darted forward with that same quick, catlike motion with which she did all things, and seizing her tall sister, she lifted her from the feet and threw her, as a man might have thrown a child, toward the others, who were now advancing upon them.

And Zaidee was sent whirling, spinning like a top among them, landing them over as if they were nine men.

Sooner had Carma relinquished her hold upon the queen than she grasped Nick's arm, and, with an exhibition of strength that amazed him, she whirled him around also, and uttered the one word: "Come!"

Carma now led the queen up the steps toward the entrance of the palace, and then, and at all retreating the queen of fighting a lot of women, dashed after her; and

so they gained the entrance-hall; and the doors, big and heavy, clanged shut behind them, pushed by ready hands, and in another moment bolts and bars were in place.

In the meantime, Carma was calmly delivering orders to her followers, for it was at once evident that these female warriors who were inside the palace belonged to Carma's own command, and were loyal to her.

And while they hastened hither and thither, in obedience to Carma's directions, Nick leaned his back against a pillar—and wondered how it was all going to end.

After a few moments, Carma came to him.

"Zaidee will not attack the palace," she said. "She will not dare to do that."

"She looked at me a moment ago as if she would dare almost anything," said Nick soberly. "Hark! What is that?"

The "that" was a resounding blow against the massive doors, as if a heavy weight had been thrown against them, and it was only too evident that Zaidee and her followers had made an attack upon the palace doors.

CHAPTER X.

AT THE BOTTOM OF THE CRATER.

Nick Carter and Carma stood side by side, listening to the attack upon the door of the palace, and it soon became evident to him that some time must elapse, at least, before a breach could be made so that their enemies could enter the building.

"Carma," he said to her then, "is there a way out of here? Is there a way of escape from the attack of your sister and her followers?"

She looked at him in surprise, and there was a flash of scorn in her lustrous eyes, too.

For an instant it seemed that she thought him afraid; and then she had the perception to see that it was not fear which had suggested the question; indeed, she had already had sufficient evidence that he was not actuated by fear in anything he did.

He saw her perplexity and the changing expressions of her beautiful face, and he understood them.

"Yesterday," he added, "even to-day, before that scene in the arena, you were a peaceful community here, living together in a kindly spirit; and now I, without in the least intending to bring misfortune upon your people, am the cause of all this strife. If there is a way of escape, I will take it; I and my friends."

"And will you take me with you?" she asked, stepping nearer to him. "Will you take me to that world in which you live?"

Nick had not thought of that, and he hesitated. "For me to remain here," she added, "means that I will be torn and devoured by the wild beasts of the arena—unless I should take my own life, and thus I

could not do, because the act would condemn me to eternal torment. Will you take me with you if I will show you and your friends a way of escape?"

"Yes," he replied impulsively. "I will take you with me. You shall not be left here to suffer for what I have done."

An expression of joy swept over her face; but without further remark she called one of her feminine warriors to her side, and gave her several directions in that strange tongue, of which the detective could understand no word; then, to Nick, she added:

"Follow Dura. She will conduct you to your friends. Then she will lead you all to a spot where you will await my coming. You will need to give no directions whatever to Dura. She already has my orders, and she will carry them out."

Carma waved her hand, and Dura at once led the way along the high corridor of the palace toward the far end of it; and as Nick turned to follow he noticed that the attack on the door had, for the moment, ceased.

And presently they mounted flights of stairs which ultimately led them to one of the towers of the palace, where Dura at last unlocked and threw open a door, standing back while he passed inside.

Larsen, Ten-Ichi, and Nielsen were there; but they were at the windows, looking down upon the scene of excitement in front of the palace, and they did not hear his approach.

Nick saw that they were in a dome of the tower, and that a balcony protected by a rail ran entirely around it. Satisfying himself in that first glance that the men of his party were all there, and also that they were uninjured, his next search was for Hilda, who was not there; and he turned to attempt to make his guide understand that he wanted Hilda also, when, to his amazement, he discovered that she had left him, and that she had also closed and locked the door after her departure.

The consequence was obvious.

Instead of coming there to release his friends from their imprisonment, he had been locked up with them.

"Is it possible that Carma has proved false?" he asked himself, with a bitter smile; for by this time he understood only too well that, although the warriors of that strange land were women, although he and his friends were in reality the prisoners of a lot of women, they were none the less in real danger, for those same women had already proved themselves to be as bloodthirsty and relentless as the fiercest of men.

"And how easily I permitted myself to be entrapped!" he muttered to himself.

His friends were still unconscious of his presence among them, and he hesitated to make them aware of it.

Their backs were toward him; they were absorbed by the scenes that were being enacted below them; scenes which they did not at all understand, for it was evi-

dent to Nick that not one of his friends had left the interior of that room during the entire day, when so much had happened to him.

The moments passed while he stood there thinking, and then, when he had about made up his mind to make his presence known, he heard the click of the bar at the opposite side of the door; it swung open before him, and there, in the aperture, stood Hilda, bright and well and beautiful and smiling, while directly behind her was the swarthy young guide whom he thought had deserted him—Dura.

Dura at once made signs to Nick, pointing, at the same time, to his friends at the windows, and he understood that she desired them all to follow her without loss of time; and so he called to them.

Larsen was the first to hear, and he turned and swung down from his perch with an exclamation of pleasure.

"My dear Carter!" he exclaimed. "Will you be good enough to tell me what the devil has happened now in this land of enchantment? Egad! I fell asleep on my yacht, three or four hundred miles from here, down the River Bermejos. I awoke here, and the time must be many days later. I find Ten-Ichi and Nielsen just rousing from their own slumbers; there is no sign anywhere of you or of Hilda. I find a plentiful meal spread out upon a table in this tower room. We eat, for we are hungry. Then I hear a noise in the street. I run to the window and look down, to see you, Carter, almost naked and apparently dead, carried on a stretcher from the palace doors. Hours later you return, but this time you are brought in what might be a good imitation of a Sedan chair; you are the center of everything; the people bow before you; there is a gaudy cloak about your shoulders, and the air of a conqueror in your manner and attitude. Ho, ho, ho, Carter! It was great!

"But there is also blood upon you, although I gather that you are not much hurt; and that tall, bronze statue of a queen watches over you as if you were a babe in arms.

"Then time passes, while these brass-faced people set to buzzing in the street like so many flies around a honey-pot. Then there is more excitement; a throng gathers; a new queen appears on the threshold of the palace; then you leap from a balcony——"

"For goodness sake, stop!" shouted Nick, laughing. "Take charge of Hilda and follow me."

"And who may this doughty warrior be whom you have brought with you, Carter?" asked Larsen, bowing low before Dura.

"She is to be our guide. Be serious, if you can, Larsen. It may all look exceedingly like a scene from a comic opera to you, but you must understand that every life here is in mortal peril. If you would save Hilda——"

"That's enough, Carter. I am ready. What are the others?"

"Dura is to lead us to safety," said Nick. "I will follow her and keep close to her. You are to follow me with Hilda; Ten-Ichi and Nielsen will form the rear guard."

"All ready! We have all got our guns. They took nothing from us whatever."

"Don't use your weapons unless you must; you would have only women to fight."

"Humph! And one cannot fight with women, no matter how big and strong and copper-colored they happen to be."

Dura was plainly impatient; and now she turned abruptly and strode away, leaving the others to follow her or not, as they chose.

They descended again by the way Nick had come there, only that they did not approach near to the main part of the palace. Still, it was near enough so that they discovered that everything was strangely silent about that region now.

The stern-faced women warriors had disappeared, and there was not a human being in sight as they turned off through a narrower corridor, and after passing through a narrow door in the wall at the end of it, a door which Dura took good care to fasten after them, they descended a flight of narrow and rather precipitous stairs, which seemed never to come to an end, and through a thick darkness so oppressive that it was oppressive.

And then, while they were feeling their way along down the stairs, Nick suddenly recalled the fact that something had been taken from his pockets, and in an instant he had produced his pocket electric search-light, and thrown a feeble but steady beam of light.

The light revealed the fact that they were traveling through a natural crevice in the earth, one that had doubtless been some time made by an earthquake, and the air was hot, and close, and oppressive around them.

And the brilliant light also produced a strange effect upon Dura, for she threw up her hands and cried out in a genuinely feminine scream.

"By Jove!" muttered Larsen. "She's a woman, after all, eh?"

But Dura had thrown herself down on the floor of the strange gallery, and with her arms raised protectively over her head, she covered them until Nick stopped nearer to her and touched her on the shoulder.

He knew that it was the light that had frightened her; and now he held the tube toward her, and showed her how the light was turned on and off.

"Now," she saw the mistake she had made, for by raising her hands she had indicated that when she first saw the light she believed that it was made by the fire of the mountain, which had suddenly enveloped them in its long sleep of centuries there.

For three hours after that they continued through the mountain, always enveloped in darkness, and Nick had begun to wonder if he had deserted them when they suddenly debouched into an open space, where a dim, although natural light, deepest of twilights, held sway.

They were inside a lofty dome; so lofty that the top of it could not be seen, save that away up in the distance, hundreds of feet over their heads, a circular plate showed, through which stars gleamed down upon them.

The detective came to a halt, in wonder and in admiration.

"This is magnificent!" he said to Larsen.

"Yes," was the reply; for he, too, was awed. "Splendid! Terrible in its magnificence."

"We are in the very center of a huge mountain," said Nick. "It is the bottom of a dry and burned-out crater here."

"Yes."

Dura had come to a halt while they were talking, and now she placed her hands to her lips and yodeled like a Swiss mountaineer; and the song she sang, if it might be called a song, was taken up and repeated by the "spirits of the mountain," until it seemed to those who listened as if a thousand voices were singing at once, all in the same refrain, all in harmony.

And then, still more wonderfully, as it seemed until they understood the cause of it, as the last echoes of Dura's song died away in the distance, another and a different one came to them from some distant point; and then it was taken up and repeated again and again, over their heads, to the right, to the left, above and around them, until at last that, too, died away as Dura's song had done.

"What was it?" exclaimed Ten-Ichi, who had drawn nearer to Dura, and who now seized her by the arm in his amazement.

She understood the question, even though the words themselves had no meaning for her; and her lips parted in a smile.

Then she raised one arm and pointed straight across the crater; and she uttered the one word:

"Carma."

And Nick Carter knew then that Carma had kept her promise to him; that she was there, in the bottom of the crater, awaiting them.

CHAPTER XI.

THE "HOUSE OF THE MOON," AND THE "DOOR OF THE MOUNTAIN."

Silently, Dura strode onward again, picking her way along the uneven surface of the pale, mountainous vaulting over her, from which the strange, glowing color of sulfur assailed them, sometimes making long

could not do, beer eternal torment. And such a fissure that was too wide to show you and as descending through deep pits, and at "Yes," he rounting over heaps of roasted stones, until me. You st came suddenly upon Carma herself.

have done, and alone on the center of a huge, flat rock, as An exp floor. Her arms were folded across her breast, out fur all the gorgeousness of her queenly costume, she riors t a royal personage indeed.

strat queen though she might have been, royal per nage though she was, she stepped forward quickly when Nick came to a halt in front of her, and, dropping upon one knee before him, she raised his hand and touched it to her lips.

She did not so much as look at the others of the party; they might not have been there, for all the attention she paid to them; her eyes were only for Nick, to whom she had given, in all its purity, that wild, untamed heart of hers.

But she said no word to him now.

Rising to her feet again, she raised her right arm and pointed back toward the way from whence they had come, and she spoke rapidly to Dura in that unknown tongue.

But Dura shook her head emphatically; she pleaded with her mistress; and, after a little, Carma turned to Nick again.

"Dura wishes to go with us," she said. "Has she your permission, Nicholas?"

"It shall be as you say, Carma," replied Nick. "If you wish her to go, and if you think it best for her that she should do so, by all means let her go with us."

When this permission was conveyed to Dura, she also fell upon one knee and touched Nick's hand with her lips; and she showed every evidence of gratitude.

"We will rest here," said Carma presently. "The way is long and difficult from here to the door of the mountain. The journey will consume many days."

"Days!" exclaimed Nick. "We are without food for such a journey as that."

Carma pointed toward a square package and replied calmly:

"I have all that is necessary there. They are the leaves of the cocoa," she added, when she saw that he did not understand. "A person may live many days, even weeks, upon a few bunches of those leaves;" and Nick remembered then that he had heard Mexican Indians tell of the wonderful nutritive and stimulating power of the cocoa leaf.

"Will we not be pursued?" he asked. "May not Zaidee and her warriors overtake us?"

Carma shook her head in a decided negative.

"Not through the House of the Moon," she said.

"The House of the Moon?" exclaimed Nick again.

"Yes. Did you not know? This is the House of the

Moon." Reference was made to it when Zaidee asked you to condemn me to death."

"But if you had been sent here, you could have escaped," said Nick.

"Yes; without you—and that would have been worse than death; worse than a thousand deaths in one, Nicholas."

He did not reply, and she continued:

"There is a way out of here, to the door of the mountain; but that way is not known to my sister Zaidee, or to any of the people. Once, long ago, Dura and I were condemned to this place, and when, after three days, they came after us to throw us to the beasts in the arena, we were no longer here. We had found the way outside, through the door of the mountain."

"What happened then, Carma?"

"Zaidee and her warriors searched for us many days, but they did not find us. We had found our way out of the mountain to the beautiful valley beyond, and there we lived together till many moons had come and gone. We were absent during the half of a change of the sun—six months—and we were given up for dead. Then, one morning, when Zaidee called her guard for the review, I stood there, with Dura beside me, and it was supposed that we were miraculously returned from the dead. Among all our people, Dura and I are the only ones who know the way out through the door of the mountain from the 'House of the Moon.'"

"Good!" said Nick. "But they will follow us this far, will they not?"

"Not into the House of the Moon, Nicholas. Rest, now, for the way before us is a weary one. It is long and tedious. Part of the distance your big friend will have to carry the gentle Hilda, for she will not have the strength and the endurance. It is strange that, although she and her fathers have lived among us as many generations as mine have, which is forever, I think she has never seemed to be one of us. She has always been as a stranger."

It was several hours later when they started on again, and this time Carma and Nick assumed the lead, walking side by side. Larsen and Hilda followed them; then came Nielsen, alone, and for a rear guard, Ten-Ichi and Dura walked together.

And it was strange, too, that one of the Asiatic dialects which was familiar to Ten-Ichi was strangely similar to the language she spoke, so that, by dint of great effort, they were enabled partly to understand one another.

Of that journey through the mountain very little need be said, save that Carma had not overstated the matter when she said it would consume many days.

It did. The veins of that great crater seemed endless.

Many times the members of the party believed them-

elves utterly lost in the bowels of the earth, and doomed to wander on until they died of starvation; but each time renewed hope came to them; and never once did the dauntless Carma lose her calmness of spirit and her confidence in her own ability to lead them out into the sunlight again.

They made their way through crevices in the rocks that were scarce wide enough to admit the passage of their bodies; they journeyed along lofty spaces where the sides and the roofs were far beyond their range of vision; they toiled up steep inclines, or went sliding down glassy spaces into unknown depths; they slept upon the rocks, and they ate their rations of cocoa leaves as they walked, growing thinner day by day, but never losing their courage or their powers of endurance—and at last they stepped out of the obscurity of that cavernous place into full view of God's gracious sunlight.

They came out upon a scene so splendid that they stood, breathlessly silent at the grandeur of it all.

They were upon a shelving table-land that was perhaps a quarter of a mile in width, and which ended over an abrupt descent of many thousand feet to the plains below them; plains and forests extending away interminably; and trailing its way among them was the silver line of a river, which extended toward the southeast until it was lost to view among the hills and trees.

"It is the Bermejo!" cried Larsen, standing with one arm around the slender figure of Hilda; and down there, somewhere, the *Viking* must be awaiting us. That is, if the people who captured us did not destroy her."

"Nothing was destroyed," said Carma. "The people about the *Viking*, as you call the vessel, do not know, to this day, what became of their master. They awoke to find him gone, that is all. They were put to sleep as they were; they awakened as you did, without knowing what had happened while they slept."

"And they were not disturbed?" asked Larsen.

"Not at all. They were dragged into slumber, as you were. They were not touched."

"In that case," said Larsen, this time addressing Nick, "we will find them exactly as we left them, awaiting my return; and they will wait there until the *Viking* comes under them, if it were necessary. My men are faithful. Come! Let us go on."

But Nick counseled rest and an abundance of food for a few days, and later they killed a mountain deer.

However, the eagerness to proceed on their way held them all in its grasp, and the following morning they started on again.

"We have only to reach the river," said Larsen. "Then we can make a raft. We can bind it together with vines, and we can drift down the river with the current until we find the small tributary where we left the *Viking*."

But although the river seemed so near to them, as

they viewed it from the top of the table-land that strange were consumed in getting to it after they had. Carma had of the mountain, as Carma aptly named the descent into an

They forded some streams and drifted across, like the on logs; they forced their way through tangled and they surmounted difficulties which need not be top here; but at last, tired and sore, they arrived at the dis-bank of the great river, and recognized it at once, by the color of the water and by the general aspect of the country around them.

When Carma and Dura would have assisted in the manufacture of a raft to bear them down the stream, Nick told her that she was now among people where men did the manual work, and that she and Dura might look on.

Nevertheless, she did her part, for she was stronger than most men, and many times more agile.

One morning, just as the sun was rising over the trees of the forest, they embarked upon their raft, which was big and strongly made, and so they started upon their journey, carried along by the swiftly flowing current toward the place where the *Viking* awaited them.

It was a delightful change, this floating with the current, after their weeks of toil through the darkness inside the mountain and over the hills and through the jungles since they discovered the river.

Carma spoke but little during this voyage, and not at all to any one save Nick, unless she was addressed, when she always replied in calm, unmoved tones, and without a change of countenance.

But when she spoke to Nick, either directly or in reply to some question that he addressed to her, there was a decided change in her manner.

At such times her eyes shone with brightness, a smile would steal into them, and a delicate flush would show through the bronze of her skin.

Her adoration of him was as simple and direct and as undisguised as it was beautiful to see; and, if truth be said, it troubled him greatly, for he saw before her nothing but unhappiness when she should arrive among highly civilized people, and should realize the difference that existed between herself and other women.

But he had to admit to himself that much of that difference was to her advantage. Carma was far more beautiful than any woman he had ever seen. She was graceful, supple, and as perfectly formed as God could make her. Her eyes were glorious in their weird brilliancy, and her oval face was as perfect in feature as an artist's dream.

Her complexion was not so dark as some women will tan in the sun; and there glowed just beneath a hue of red which is indescribable.

During their travels she had learned to speak English with a readiness that was astonishing, and without a noticeable accent, save that she gave each word a

could not do, *best* musical intonation with her contralto eternal torment.^s show you and on they floated down the river, Nick discovered "Yes," he *cr* at the rear end of the raft, with her eyes me. You *ad* amily upon the mountains they were rapidly have done *fl* behind them; and on one such occasion he said

An *er* all
out *fu* does your heart still cling to the people you are
rior *ut* living behind you, Carma? Do you wish that you
str *ng* vere back again among those mountain peaks?"

"No," she replied, turning to him with one of her rare smiles. "My heart goes with me when we are together; it goes with you when you are absent from me. I was not looking back, Nicholas; I was looking ahead."

"At what, Carma?"

"Toward the strange people I am to meet and know: toward the strange world that I am approaching with each day; toward the unknown. I am wondering always how your people will regard me. It is all so strange, so mysterious, so terrible!"

"You will be a queen among them, Carma, even as you were a queen among your own people; but you will rule with a very different power, child, for your scepter will be your beauty."

CHAPTER XII.

A QUEEN AMONG WOMEN.

They found the *Viking* awaiting them exactly where they had left her when they were taken away, drugged into senselessness by Zaidee and her followers; but the most surprising thing about it all was the calm assurance with which Larsen's men greeted him upon his return.

It was exactly as if he had only been gone a day, and as if they had expected his return at any moment; and, indeed, it was so.

And there, aboard the *Viking*, Larsen had provided, among other things, a munificent supply of female wearing-apparel.

"You know, Nick," he explained, after he had spread his goods out over the chairs and tables of the main cabin for the women's inspection, and the men of the party had returned to the deck for the double purpose of permitting the ladies to inspect their new possessions, and also to get the *Viking* under way down the river, "you understand that I have been some years already engaged in my search for Hilda. You must know, also, that I foresaw that, when I found her, the first thing she would require, being a woman, would be clothes. It was likely that her own costume would be more or less barbarian in style and cut, don't you see?"

"Sure," said Nick, smiling.

"Well, the style and cut of my clothing doesn't make an enormous amount of difference to you and to me, but to a woman it is a very important business. A woman

would face the devil himself, provided she was properly clothed and in the best style and textures; eh?"

"Right again."

"So, you see, I laid in a stock for Hilda to select from. There is enough for a dozen or a score of women down there in the cabin, as you could see for yourself."

"Yes," I thought as much."

"And there is as great a variety of sizes and shapes and cuts and whatchucalls down there as there are clothes. I think that the three girls will find sufficient there to fit themselves out finely, and to fill a few trunks besides—if we had 'em here to fill. You see, I didn't know whether Hilda would be tall or short, and all that, so I fitted out for a regular society dinner, with the traveling-suits thrown in." Then he broke into a hearty laugh.

"What is the matter now?" asked Nick.

"I just happened to remember that not one of the three, Hilda, Carma, or Dura, has ever seen gowns like those before. I was wondering if they would know how to get into them."

"I think you can trust a woman for that," smiled Nick.

"Likely enough."

The detective had returned to his cigars, and now he was enjoying the luxury of one; and he and Ten-Ichi stood side by side in the bow of the vessel as she swung gracefully around and steamed out of the tributary into the greater river.

"It has been a strange adventure, Ten-Ichi," he said to his assistant.

"And the end is not yet," replied Ten-Ichi. "There are complications ahead of you, chief. Serious complications, don't you think?"

"You refer to Carma?"

"Yes."

"She will not be a complication, Ten-Ichi."

"No? I had feared that she would be. Her devotion to you is absolute."

"Yes," said Nick calmly. "It is," and he blew a wreath of tobacco smoke into the air.

"She is not so dark as some Spaniards, or as some Italian beauties I have seen; not nearly so dark as my own people, chief."

"No," said Nick again, blowing away another cloud of smoke.

"And she is infinitely more beautiful and more interesting than any woman I have ever seen."

"Yes."

"And with a little opportunity she will be as accomplished as the best of them, chief."

"She will," asserted Nick, still blowing smoke, and now smiling quietly.

"I have been wondering——" began Ten-Ichi.

"Yes?" said Nick encouragingly.

"If you returned that devotion."

"Have you? Why?"

"Because I tremble for the consequences, if you do not, chief."

"What consequences would you dread, Ten-Ichi?"

"The effect upon her. She would wither like a rose before an open furnace door. Her heart would break. It would kill her as surely as if a bolt of lightning were to strike her down. That is what I fear."

Nick threw away his cigar; then he calmly produced another one, and lighted it before he replied, and then he said:

"No bolt of lightning shall strike Carma, my lad, if I have the strength to stand between it and her. Do you understand me, Ten-Ichi?"

Before the latter could reply, the voice of Larsen hailed them from the after deck.

"Come here—you!" he called. "Come and witness the transformation. The wit of woman has triumphed. Come and offer your allegiance to our three queens."

The wit of woman had triumphed indeed.

Carma and Hilda and Dora had come out upon the deck with their arms around one another, and they had made the most of their opportunities below in the cabin; and as they moved along the deck, smiling as they advanced, with their eyes shining in sympathy with their feelings, and each dressed elegantly, though plainly and simply, in becoming costumes which the forethought of the big Norwegian had provided, they formed a picture that was good to look upon.

"A woman is a woman the world over!" said Larsen, with his big laugh. "Put her anywhere you will, and only open a trunk in front of her, and she will blossom like a green bay-tree."

"It is all so very wonderful," said Carma, advancing to Nick's side, and placing one hand in his while she looked up at him with perfect trust in her eyes. "I feel differently, for some reason. I am not the same Carma that I was but a short time ago; and Dora and Hilda both feel the same. I almost think"—and she

smiled again with amusement—"that they always belonged to me, and that they have been waiting patiently until I should come to claim them."

"There seems to be no doubt of that, Carma, Nick. "And pray, what have you done with jewels?"

"I have laid them aside. I thought of throwing them away in the water; but then it occurred to me that possibly you would prefer that I should keep them."

"Keep them! I should say so. There is not another woman in all the world who possesses jewels like yours. You will be glad enough to show them later on."

"Did you ever see three such radiant beauties?" demanded Larsen. "What is the matter with you, Jack Nielsen? You are as dumb as an oyster."

"I am wishing that my wife, whom I have not seen for six years, was here now," he replied; and he turned and went below.

At Corrientes the voyageurs stopped for half a day, and there Nielsen found a reply to his cabled message home; so that after that he was as happy as the rest of them.

During the voyage down the Paraguay River there was one day when Larsen and Nick found themselves alone on the deck, for half a gale of wind was blowing and the rain was falling fiercely.

"There is one question that I have been wishing to ask you, Nick," said Larsen, pulling the detective behind the shelter of the deck-house.

"Yes?" replied Nick. "What is it?"

"Do you recall that time, now long ago, when we started away from New York on this expedition? When I virtually made you a prisoner, in order to force you to go with me? When you sent a wireless message back to New York—to a woman named Clarice?"

"Perfectly," replied Nick, without a change of expression. "Why do you ask?"

"Because—er—well, to be frank, because I thought, at the time, that you were in love with that same Clarice, and that you intended to make her your wife."

"Did you? You were mistaken, Larsen. Clarice is very dear to me—and I am to her, I think and hope. But we did not love each other in the way you mean. She will be as rejoiced as I that I have found Carma."

"Lord, Nick! You don't know how that relieves my mind! Carma is a queen among all women, even if you did have to go to the far end of the world to find her."

could not do, began
eternal torment. Nick softly, and with a smile on his lips,
show you and on among women, and among men, as well.

"Yes," he said, "she is beautiful than any woman in the world,
me. You should pardon—and yours."

An exclamation, "Hilda is beautiful; but Carma is—is—is—"

out full, "Carma is Carma," said Nick.

riors, "There was a long silence between them after that.
str, "Nick was finally broken by Larsen, who continued as
if there had been no hiatus in their conversation.

"But goodness, Nick, think of all that those three
women have got to learn; eh?"

The detective laughed aloud.

"They will acquire what is necessary, just as they
donned those clothes which your foresight provided,
Larsen," he said; "they will absorb it without your
realizing it."

At another time, when the vessel was far out at sea,
bound northward, and at an hour when a full moon was

casting its radiance down upon the decks, Nick and
Carma stood together at the rail of the *Viking*, looking
off over the troubled waters of the ocean.

"Tell me, Nicholas, what I am to do when we arrive
in that city which you call New York?" she said.

"You are to become my wife, Carma," he replied.

"You are to meet my friends. They are all to witness
our marriage; and then, after that, we are to travel for
a time over the world, in order that you may see it and
know it as I do. And during that time you are to have
around and about you people who will teach you all the
things you wish to know. But most of all, henceforth,
as long as we both shall live, you are to be my sweet-
heart-wife."

THE END.

The next number (531) will contain: "A Black-
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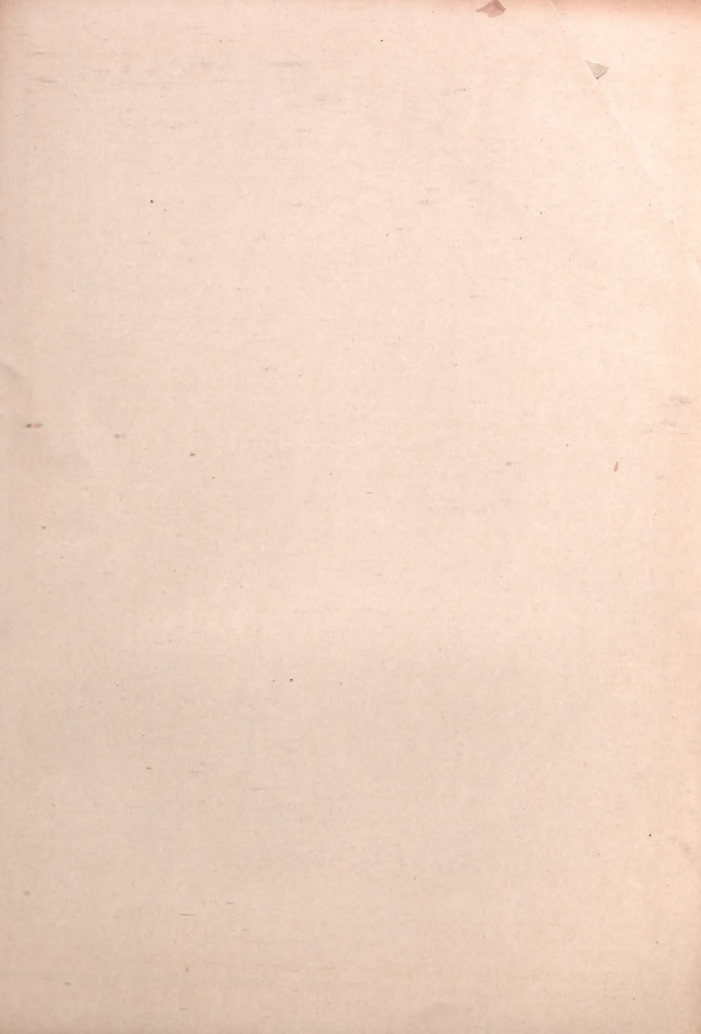
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